

The Crew Report Article:

Electronics Guru:

Personal Communications - Tips and Trends for 2007

'Any time, any place, anywhere' a certain advertising jingle used to say. The illusion was maintained by willowy, smiling models sipping away at a glass of fortified wine on hot air balloons, private jets and, yes, Super Yachts. The association with an indulgent life of quality pastimes in exotic locations was meant to reflect favourably on this particular tipple. It certainly created that impression. Compare that to the superlatives used in the mobile phone and satellite industry and you soon find your self floundering on a reef of desperately over-sold hyperbole. The time to get suspicious about any product which purports to have 'unlimited', 'anywhere', 'free' or 'one low fixed price' in the marketing blurb is 'immediately'.

If you go on any mobile phone manufacturer's website you will find a bewildering range of phone models, most of them made obsolete by the latest devices hitting the market. Whenever there is a special offer of a 'Free Phone' if you sign up with operator 'x', it is usually one of these obsolescent devices clogging up warehouses across the globe. Alternatively, it will be the device needing the most 'added value' services to be able use all the functions it is capable of. Not so in the future! We are about to see some consolidation in the handset market as the big players put their money on a much smaller range of high performance devices. Several current marks will disappear as those companies who cannot compete bow out of the race. This is happening now. We are already seeing phones which have a camera or an MP3 player good enough to leave your camera or your MP3 player at home. Add internet access/email and TV and you have the focus (or foci) of mobile phone marketing for the next few years. But don't expect these phones to be cheap. The manufacturers and operators who could not stand the pace will have fallen by the wayside and that will allow those remaining to improve their margins. Take a look at the prices for unlocked (non Operator) phones and you will get the idea.

The new phones coming out this year have WIFI and HSDPA capability, which is the latest development of 3G high speed data up to 7.2Mbps. At the moment this enables you to download TV programming or to make voice over IP calls. However, there are a couple of issues to take into account. Firstly, your HSDPA speed can decrease significantly if you have a lot of people connected. Voice over IP calls also use significantly more bandwidth than normal GSM voice calls. Both of these can therefore eat up your data plan quite quickly. They also become very expensive when you're roaming.

There are a couple of interesting trends to watch in mobile communications. One is the Wireless City concept where there is a wireless mesh network available to all for free. This has been planned or introduced in some areas in Britain by city corporations looking to provide it as an infrastructure product. The basic principle is that the service is used during the day for access to email and intranets to run the city and then the citizens can use it at night for surfing. Working on the more widely held principle that there is no such thing as 'free' anything, it is expected that you will have to accept all kinds of advertising and be on a mailing list in order to get a 'free' service and/or pay a monthly fee for any kind of useable bandwidth (see the small print). Alternatively, the service would be one of your options with your Telecom or

Mobile Phone operator and the option would be added to or included in your monthly package.

Another development is seamless handover of voice calls. At the moment, you can use a WIFI enabled mobile device to make a VOIP call and handover to a GSM call if you leave or lose your WIFI connection or vice versa; in theory that is. There are some experimental networks and dual function phones, but this is not universally available. The big Telecom or Mobile operators will probably be first to implement this so that you can use the WIFI at home, their GSM network, 3G data or WIFI Hotspots with a seamless interchange. But again, you would have to look out when you go roaming and it is unlikely that it (roaming on the GSM or WIFI networks) would be an option at first.

What is needed is a least cost routing application for your mobile phone which takes GSM roaming, satellite, or proprietary networks into account. This should be a function not noticed by the user. But at the moment you do not have something akin to the seamless handover of GSM voice calls when you move from one cell to another. The WIFI network operator only wants authorised, i.e. paying guests on his network and the mobile operator or Telecom operator likewise. And in these cases, unless you want to sit down and work out the roaming rates across a couple of hundred different operators, you cannot accurately predict the charges.

Having something like this would however move us down the road towards fixed price communications. Operators continue to move towards pricing models where you pay a fixed monthly fee for a particular package. The new value added services, data, TV, downloads, Blackberry, are all available with a fixed fee for a set amount of additional data or content. There are even fixed amounts of data available on roaming tariffs now. In the not too distant future, it will be possible to plan communications for a Super Yacht cruise itinerary where your communications connections all fall within predetermined call plans with fixed prices. The yacht user will be able to wander from GSM coverage, to Starbucks to the boat WIFI via satellite without losing a connection and the captain or crew member will know in advance how much their communications will cost.

Mobile TV is receiving a lot of plugging at the moment. There is now a range of mobile video phones and tablet PCs hitting the market with TV companies offering Mobile TV in a number of countries either as IPTV over 3G or as a DVB-H (Digital Video Broadcast - Handheld) broadcast just like a regular digital TV. In Italy the DVB service provided by Three (La 3) has been around since the World Cup Football in Germany last year. There will soon be services in Finland, Germany, the Russian Federation and the US. The appeal to the yacht user may be limited because you would only be able to receive local TV. This is fine if you *are* at home or if you understand the local language but otherwise...

But as those regular followers of the Crew Report will have guessed, there is a solution to that. 'Sling Media' make the Sling Box which is a device that plugs in between your home PC and your TV decoder. You can then access your home TV via a laptop or PC anywhere you happen to be. Well, now you can do that via your mobile phone. Sling Media has partnered with the 3 network in Britain to enable you to do this and other networks will be offering it soon. Now isn't that handy!

It doesn't end there. Mobile operators websites now resemble a 'who's who' of application providers such as Yahoo, You-Tube, Myspace, Sky TV, Gmail for mobile, not to mention games, and on it goes. With all the hoops being jumped through to get you to spend more time on your mobile phone, what are the operators doing to

improve things like battery life, billing, and bad customer service. Having a pocket size entertainment and information centre is no good if you need a rucksack to carry the batteries, cannot figure out your bill and cannot speak to anyone who knows anything about any of the above. At the recent 3GSM conference in Barcelona, the big noises from the mobile communications industry did at least devote some time to these thorny subjects. How far we will get is a moot point. In some countries there are more mobile phones than people. The history of companies putting the customer first in over saturated markets is not good.

Behind the scenes there is a new technology with it's own acronym appearing every couple of months. The mobile communications industry is finally starting to get the message that it is only the boffins who are really interested in that stuff. It will become more confusing before it becomes clear, but the user does not have a 'mobile environment multi-channel experience'; he or she makes a phone call, or looks up some information, plays a game, sends an email or watches TV. There are at the moment too many restrictions on the extent of services (especially across borders), access to connections, varying tariffs, additional charges and there are huge differences in what is considered 'added value'. But, for all that, we are gradually, bit by bit, getting to the stage where a fixed price truly 'anytime, any place, anywhere' service will be achievable although it is doubtful that you will be able to go to a single operator to get it.

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