CALENDAR WEEKEND

Holding a key to the city

Put a cellphone to work — to locate friends, avoid traffic, find a cafe, check show times — and you mobilize your options.

By Susan Carpenter, Times Staff Writer

The set by New York rockers the Animators was only 40 minutes long, but in that time Bich Ngoc Cao made a lot of plans. Before the first song was even finished, she had instant messaged a friend to see when he was coming to the club and text messaged another to arrange lunch. By the third song, she had IM'd two other friends.

She took a phone call and answered an e-mail before hearing back from friend No. 1. He'd been at the club the entire time. "What do I have to do?" he IM'd in a message that appeared on Cao's little color screen, glowing in the dimly lighted club. "Jump up & down?"

Even if he had, Cao probably wouldn't have seen him. She was so absorbed with her Treo that, as the Animators finished their last song at Hollywood's Hotel Café, she clapped with it in her hand.

Cellphone users tend to fall in two camps — those who use their phones to make calls and those who use them for everything else, such as listening to music, getting restaurant recommendations, receiving instant traffic updates and otherwise planning their weekends.

Cao falls solidly in the latter.

"Anything that's not on my phone, I don't deal with," she says.

Sure, making calls is important, says Cao, who lives in Venice and works as a Web producer, managing and creating content for the popular social-networking site MySpace. But her phone is even more valuable for e-mailing, text messaging, instant messaging, Web surfing, game playing, news tracking, address finding and picture taking.

Cao uses her phone so much that she says, "it's an extension of me." Still, she could be using it for even more.
She could listen to songs and podcasts or custom mix her own ring tones. She could watch TV news clips, movie trailers and music videos.

Cao could also manage her money, track her diet and read comics. Or automatically receive lottery results, horoscopes, sports scores and alerts about when her favorite musicians are coming to town.

She could get a restaurant recommendation — along with an address, phone number and driving directions — by keying in a ZIP code, or with a simple click of a button, broadcast her location to a network of friends. Listening to an unfamiliar song on her car radio, she could dial a phone number, hold up her handset and have the artist and song title appear on the screen seconds later, as if by magic.

Offered through cellphone service providers, mobile content companies and Web-based content portals such as AOL, many of the services themselves are free (though mobile carriers might charge fees for using them). Others are available through monthly subscriptions that range from $2 to about $10.

Largely unknown to the masses but enthusiastically embraced by die-hard cellphone fanatics and techno geeks, a bevy of mobile content options have come to market in the last year or so. And the release rate of these on-the-go offerings continues to race along at breakneck speed. It's just their adoption by your average, everyday cellphone user that is slow.

"It's interesting how little people know about all the features and bells and whistles their phones have," says Fabrice Grinda, CEO and founder of mobile content provider Zingy. "It's already so much more advanced in other countries."

In Japan and Korea, for example, cellphones now double as debit cards, allowing users to pay for items by waving their handsets in front of vending machines, convenience store checkouts and movie theater gates. In Hong Kong, lonely hearts can use their phones to carry around virtual girlfriends. In Scotland, public schools are experimenting with sending exam results to their students via text message.

Here in the U.S., ring tones dominate the mobile content market. In 2004, they rang up sales to the tune of $250 million. Of the country's 179 million cellphone owners, 15% have purchased a ring tone.

Four years ago, ring tones were just emerging in the U.S. Indeed, in 2001, there were a number of issues hampering the development of mobile content. Few phones were powerful enough, and most content owners — news organizations, Hollywood studios, radio stations — didn't see the point in licensing their content for mobile devices.

The masses of teenagers and young adults we see today — the ones who walk around with cellphones as if they were biological appendages — also didn't exist in herds as they do now. Cellphones weren't nearly as ubiquitous in this age group, because they were too expensive, and few parents saw necessity in their kids owning them.

But thanks to flat-fee family-calling plans, which the major carriers introduced about two years ago, and phones that often cost nothing, the number of teens and young adults with cellphones has increased dramatically. They are now driving the market.

Emilie Elizabeth, 24, has been using the Internet since she was 14. Now the photographer is all about the Internet — and her cellphone.

Standing outside Little Pedro's nightclub in downtown L.A. on a recent Tuesday night, Elizabeth and her friend Verdell Wilson were snapping pictures of each other with their respective Motorolas and "moblogging" them, instantly uploading the images to their blogs through a service called TextAmerica.

Moments earlier, Elizabeth had squealed when she saw a notice on her phone's screen announcing that a friend had just arrived.

"Oh my God, Logan's here!" she announced, reading the message delivered via Dodgeball. A sort of Friendster for mobile phones, Dodgeball is a social-networking program that lets subscribers announce their location to a preselected group of friends and friends of friends that has been established online.

"The big thing in L.A. is you just need an ice-breaker in order to start talking to someone," said Elizabeth, who moved to L.A. from New York a year ago.

"[Dodgeball] sends you a photo, and if you find them, it's like, 'Hey, you're on the website,' and it's not as awkward as randomly approaching someone for no reason," added Elizabeth, who met her friend Daniel Hengeveld because she saw his picture on Dodgeball.
Community or social-networking services such as Dodgeball, TextAmerica, FotoShare and VeriChat, which, respectively, allow people to meet, moblog, share pictures and IM with friends via their cellphone screens, are enormously popular for a generation that's been weaned online. But of the four main mobile content categories — personalization (ring tones, etc.), entertainment (games, songs), information (news, maps) and community (chatting, blogging) — such networking is not the biggest part of the market.

That would be ring tones, which are widely accepted by consumers in part because they've been around longest. Ring tones were first to take off because most phones were equipped to support them. And the music industry — eager to find additional revenue streams to combat declining record sales and peer-to-peer file sharing — was one of the first content owners to partner with mobile service and content providers.

These days, the ring tone category continues to expand, with new offerings such as "bling" tones (hip-hop ring tones recorded specifically for mobile phones), voice tones (like ring tones, but with spoken-word samples), video ringers (which allow users to identify callers with video music clips) and ring backs (which allow callers to hear music instead of a ringing sound). The most popular ring tone today, according to Billboard magazine's most recent Hot Ringtones chart: "Gold Digger," by Kanye West, featuring Jamie Foxx.

Thanks to color screens, more powerful phones and faster wireless data transfer, the entertainment category is also picking up speed, bringing cellphones one step closer to that long-ballyhooed, all-in-one device. Accessed with varying levels of user ease and connectivity speed, services differ by phone model and mobile provider, but many "smartphones" — the Treo 650, for example — already incorporate the functions of a camera, stereo, gaming unit, TV, personal digital assistant (PDA) and the internet into a single, easy-to-carry gizmo.

Downloading games is the most popular entertainment option (in 2004, 5% of U.S. cellphone owners have purchased at least one), but mobile entertainment options are rapidly expanding. Among the many offerings that have come out recently: Music videos, news clips and abbreviated TV shows (a.k.a. mobisodes) on Sprint, Verizon and Cingular.

And music. A small handful of music phones have come on the market in the last year, including the Motorola ROKR E1, a phone with Apple's iTunes built in, which came out last week.

As exciting as these new developments are, using them can be frustratingly slow. For many cellphone users, they are also too expensive and/or too complicated.

"Right now we're ... at ring tones, screensavers and games. The most simple, basic things," says Brad Zutaut, founder of L.A.-based Pod2Mob, a new software program that enables users to download podcasts, or online audio programs, directly to their phones whenever they want. "[Most people] don't realize the data potential on a phone. It's the same potential we have at our home or office computer. Everything we do there we could do on a telephone."

Eventually.

The barriers, Zutaut says, are the phones themselves and the technological limitations of the mobile service networks. On the phone side, it's a matter of processing power, screen size and keypad functionality. As for carriers, it's how quickly they can deliver data, and the price they charge to deliver it.

"Each year, one of those barriers gets chipped away, making our mobile phone more like our office or home experience."

Pep WILLIAMS is on his BlackBerry 7100T "all day," he says. "It never stops. I don't really use my home computer because I'm only home to sleep," adds the 34-year-old, a pro skateboarder.

A master at multi-tasking, Williams says he receives as many as 150 e-mails in a single day. Good thing his 1,000-minute T-Mobile plan comes with unlimited Internet access.

"There's times I'm on IM with two people and sending a text message to someone and I'm doing e-mail at the same time," says Williams, who also uses his phone to answer personal ads (while driving) and to make calls wirelessly via Bluetooth (while cruising bike paths on his longboard). "It's so convenient because you get things done so fast."

Increasingly mobile lifestyles seem to be translating into increased demands on our cellphones. Which services will stick and which will fade away to be laughed at later will be determined by the market, but some clues are already available.

According to a cellphone trend survey conducted earlier this year, there's high interest in location-based information
services providing maps, alternate traffic routes and business locations; lukewarm interest in satellite radio and
megapixel cameras; and weak interest in broadcast TV and phones that double as debit or credit cards.

"There will be 10 good ideas for every one that's a commercial success," says Allyn Hall, director of wireless
research for In-Stat, the Arizona-based communications market research firm that conducted the survey,
interviewing 6,500 "early adopters" of technology.

In a landscape as fast-moving as mobile content, popular opinion is subject to change, Hall concedes.

"People oftentimes don't fully understand what the technology or the service offerings could provide and oftentimes
can't visualize how it would impact their lives.

"In a couple years, when their teenage kids are using it, they think, 'That would be really cool.' "

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