

PetCell helps locate and recover lost dogs

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On the Rock Creek Parkway running trail in the heart of Washington, D.C., a steady stream of joggers runs past a tabbed flier attached to a utility pole describing Peaches, a missing parakeet, and offers a reward for its return.

Odds are that Peaches is gone with no hope of return.

For anyone who's been in this situation, even for a few hours, the feeling is unmistakable. The owner has no idea if the pet is all right, alive, has been taken or is merely lost. And even if the pet has simply wandered off a few blocks only to be found being patted by friendly children, the

owner has been worried sick with the thought of what might have happened.

This might be about to change. PetsMobility, a wireless communications company focused on the pet industry, is set to release its upcoming PetCell communications unit this March. Measuring 3 inches in length and equipped with GPS, cellular and optional video technologies, the product has been called "Fido's first cell phone" and is meant to serve as a communications gateway for when a pet goes missing.

The bone-shaped unit, which attaches to a dog's collar (but is a little too unwieldy for cats), can be utilized in several ways. Should a dog go missing, owners can activate the PetCell's GPS and A-GPS (a global positioning variant that allows for views of indoor environments) tracking and then follow the signal via a voice-enabled call center or through any Web-enabled device such as a PDA or a computer. Users can also open voice links to their pets via the device, which also features a "Call Owner" button that can be used if someone finds the pet and wants to report its location.

A GeoFence option, which functions similarly to wireless fence technology, can be ordered for the PetCell to inform owners if their pet has wandered beyond a set parameter, while onboard temperature sensors let the owner know if their pet is too hot or too cold.

Finally, the PetCell will support a small wireless camera, which allows owners to observe their pet's surroundings and behavior and makes the device attractive to emergency teams looking to train canines for search-and-rescue and tactical work. The unit is waterproof and shock-resistant to allow it to handle whatever its canine wearer throws at it.

"We are definitely for responsible dog owners to be able to find their pets, however their gadget promotes the idea that you can call your pet ...

we think that's irresponsible, especially considering leash laws," said Lisa Peterson, director of Club Communications for the American Kennel Club, a not-for-profit firm that maintains an active pet registry and sponsors events and training.

"The device should be used for locating a pet, not letting a pet wander and roam unsupervised," said Peterson, who pointed out that more permanent forms of identification such as small tattoos or surgically implanted microchips can lead to better chances of recovery.

"I just think the gadget goes to show pet owners are looking to fill a high-tech bond between them and their pets," said Peterson. They need to see that they're doing it in the spirit of being a good dog owner."

"It sounds to me like they've covered all the bases in that you can access it remotely on your own equipment or have a service wired in to track it for you. Being able to have your pet hear you and provide reassurance to your pet is a good idea" said Jean Skeffington, a long-time dog owner and University of Pittsburgh doctoral student.

"If the pet's gotten away and is skittish, it might be the kind of thing to put them at ease with the sound of your voice," said Skeffington with regard to PetCell's two-way voice communication feature that allows the owner to "call" a missing pet, which has raised a few eyebrows and been politely joked about.

The PetCell is due for release to the market in March 2006 and will retail between \$350 and \$400. It will join a U.S. marketplace that spent \$35.9 billion on pets in 2005 according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. Whether it will make an enormous difference in the long run has yet to be seen, but for pet owners seeking additional peace of mind, a new tool has fallen into their hands.

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