

# Vodafone and Orange join messaging forces

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United Kingdom-based cellular providers Vodafone and Orange will soon provide their customers with instant messaging interoperability. The companies unveiled the move at last week's 3GSM World Congress in Barcelona.

"As we have seen over the last few years, service interoperability has unlocked the true potential for mobile. While we, as mobile operators, need to compete at the retail level, we must also continue to work together at the service interoperability level in order to stimulate customer demand and to continue to grow our industry," said Arun Sarin, Vodafone CEO, via a joint statement by the companies.

Currently, mobile operators offer a text messaging service, called short messaging service or "SMS" outside the United States. Users can send these messages to customers of any other mobile operator, without interoperability worries.

A spokeswoman for Vodafone said the instant messaging service "essentially looks pretty similar" to traditional text messaging.

"You can send a message to a group of people on your buddy list, and when your buddy's phone is activated, you can see that on your buddy list," said Vodafone Communications Manager Janine Young.

"With a regular SMS, you don't know if the other person's phone is activated."

Young added that SMS text messages are limited to 160 characters, while instant messages can be longer. She also said that the pricing would be comparable for the two services.

"The exact pricing depends on the markets" in various countries, Young said. "Some markets charge on a data volume basis, and since instant messages tend to be longer than SMS messages, the price would be (somewhat) higher."

"However, some markets charge on a message basis, and in that case instant message pricing is very comparable."

In other words, "What might be the norm in Italy is not the way things would be priced in the U.K.," Young said.

Vodafone already has an instant messaging platform available in 11 countries and based on open standards, and Orange has already launched a similar platform in France, with plans to launch in the U.K., Romania and the Netherlands later in 2006.

Also, in June 2005, Vodafone and MSN announced an agreement, to enable seamless instant messaging between MSN computer users and Vodafone Messenger customers.

The Orange-Vodafone agreement, which the companies said was the first between multi-national mobile operators to launch such an interface, would allow Orange and Vodafone instant messengers to communicate with each other.

The agreement does not cover computer-to-phone messaging, such as the service offered by America Online in the United States. According to Vodafone spokeswoman Janine Young, this kind of move is feasible in the future, although it is a more technically complex undertaking.

Orange and Vodafone are also encouraging cell providers and Internet service providers to adopt the same open standard approach. To date, the companies have received support and interest from China Mobile, O2 UK, Telefonica Movile Espana, T-Mobile International and Turkcell, according to the companies' statement.

The Orange-Vodafone agreement means that users will be able to take advantage of the service in any country where both companies operate.

"I think (it's) great," said Jordan Berg, an American doing his master's degree in London. Berg uses the Fresh cell phone service, through a company called Car Phone Warehouse.

"It'll work well here. That's all people do here when they are out, is text," he said.

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