

Wireless World: Religious ringtones

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The muezzin is calling. But the cleric is not in a minaret, above the town square, reminding all that it is time to face Mecca and pray. He's a digital muezzin, calling on the mobile phone of the worldwide faithful, with a daily reminder ringtone. Experts are telling United Press International's Wireless World that religious ringtones -- and ringback tones -- are growing in popularity throughout the world amongst people of faith.

"Music expresses who someone is," Cindy Mesaros, vice president of marketing at Moderati Inc., a mobile-phone ringtone developer based in San Francisco, told Wireless World. "What better way for a person of faith to tell others who they are than through religious music?"

Whether it is gospel music, or a Contemporary Christian, chart-topping hit, or the dulcet tones of a muezzin calling out five prayer times a day, mobile carriers, like Cellular One, Alltel, T-Mobile and Cingular are offering these kinds of sounds as religious-based ringtones.

Created by independent developers, like Good News Holdings, LLC, and Barna Group Ltd., projects like FaithMobile are also offering this inspirational content directly to consumers, through their own portals, or via rebranding deals with carriers, for a fee of around \$5.99 per month.

Even the secular humanists seem to be getting into the trend -- those who hold a man-centered, not God-centered, ethically based, view of the world.

"We have a whole series of socially responsible ring tones -- with anti-poverty and anti-animal cruelty themes," Andy Nulman, president and chief marketing officer of Airborne Entertainment, a ringtone developer, based in Montreal, told Wireless World. "The ringtone is the new bumper sticker, or the new protest sign, raising your message above the crowd, letting them know what you think," said Nulman.

The niche first emerged a few years ago and is just now starting to take off.

Mesaros said that a few years ago, shortly after she finished the prestigious graduate program in marketing at Northwestern University and founded Moderati, she researched the market and discovered that Gospel music, even in this supposedly secular age, accounted for 7 percent of all music sales. Christian contemporary music was also a hot genre. So the firm decided to launch the service -- labeled Divine Calling -- to religious folk.

"We decided to launch it and went out with a regional carrier, US Cellular," recalls Mesaros. "There was a little bit of software that is downloaded to the phone."

Now that the independent software vendors are selling the ringtones, via their own portals, as well as through the carriers, the trend is gaining momentum.

Nulman said that one of his employees was complaining in a meeting that ringtones were so "frivolous." He suggested that the company do something "socially responsible," said Nulman. That led to next week's planned launch, in Las Vegas, at a trade show for the cellular industry, of the new, socially responsible themed ringtones, called "Just Cause" products, said Nulman, noting that the message of one of the ringtones is, "Every 3.6 seconds, someone dies of hunger."

That's decidedly different than the violent hip-hop, often misogynistic rap songs that one hears on subways and street corners throughout the U.S. today from one's fellow mobile-phone customers.

Overseas, the trend is growing too. In the United Kingdom a Christian text-messaging service called UCB Mobile was created by United Christian Broadcasters Ltd. The service sends prayers by text messaging to the faithful, as well as receives prayer requests. Another firm, based in Dubai, called Ilkone Mobile Communications, developed a mobile phone, which included a compass, to tell the owner which direction to turn to pray to Mecca, the Muslim holy city. The mobile phone also features a ringtone alarm with a real meuzzin's voice calling them to prayer, as well as an electronic version of the Koran. Another provider has developed a mobile-phone service for Orthodox Jews in Israel, which garnered some attention recently during the election for a successor for the stricken Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The marketing community -- advertising agencies -- thinks this kind of service will do good and generate a profit. A study by Energy BBDO said belief-oriented services may be particularly popular among 13- to 18-year-olds. "The pessimism of Generation X and the exuberant self-reliance of early Gen Y has given way to a new ethos," said the Energy BBDO study of 3,322 teenagers in 13 countries spanning the globe. "Sixty percent of the teens surveyed agreed with the statement, 'I would fight for a cause I believe in.'"

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