

Wireless World: 'Card-less' loyalty promos

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Isn't it frustrating when you go to the corner drug store, buy some milk and bread, and at checkout have to fumble when the girl asks you if you have your store discount card? Experts tell United Press International's Wireless World that one, small, everyday humiliation will soon disappear from your existence here, as wireless technology renovates retail processes.

So-called card-less loyalty programs are emerging that enable consumers to pay for their purchases with their mobile phones, and receive automatic updates on their account status, including extra savings, or planned promotions, via secure messaging service (SMS). No more cards to find in your cavernous wallet, or cash to pull out of your pocket. Just present your phone, and the credit card, linked to the phone account, is billed automatically by the merchant.

"Merchants can take advantage of cost-effective, high-impact interactive card-less loyalty programs, and let customers pay with their mobile phones, speeding check-out, and cutting costs by offering flexible payment options," a spokesman for MobileLime, a mobile marketing service, based in Watertown, Mass., told Wireless World.

Customers dial a toll free number to sign up for the service -- 866-360-LIME -- and pre-pay for purchases. Then when they are at the store, they enter the merchant's location ID number into the phone, followed by the "pound" sign. After that, they give the cashier the last four digits of their mobile number to complete the transaction.

The service is available for a number of transactions, including groceries, cab fare, ordering flowers, buying clothes or even paying a bar tab.

The technology is seen as the latest evolution in the SMS or mobile messaging service field. "Today, carriers are looking to evolve toward a more integrated messaging experience beyond basic SMS and MMS protocols," Francisco Kattan, director of product marketing at Openwave, a software developer that works with mobile phone companies, told Wireless World.

As video mail becomes common on mobile phones in the coming years -- it is offered in some locales now, on a provisional basis -- consumers will expect even more advanced messaging, like video messaging. This will be integrated into customer service processes too -- for merchants, experts said. "This is a fundamental shift in the way messaging services have previously operated, requiring the user to adapt new protocols," said Kattan. "New services should adapt to the user's needs."

In a sense, the technology trend here is similar to that which is seen on the Internet -- personalization of marketing. "We're seeing a movement beyond person-to-person services," said Kattan. "We expect the coming year to bring a variety of personalized and adaptive messaging services."

In addition to the texting and messaging developments on phones, new media are developing that cross a number of platforms. For example, an interactive advertising agency, based in Atlanta, called Think Interactive, created an online banner for Alltel's launch of its BlackBerry service. The banner enabled consumers to text message a friend -- by clicking on the banner, something of a new approach. The texting banner is available at: www.thinkinc.com/awards/blackberry.

There is also the arrival of so-called Interactive Messaging Unlimited

(IMU), which takes that concept even further, enabling messaging from any platform to any platform. "IMU has been used for both entertainment and business purposes at concerts, clubs, bars, sporting events and tradeshow around the country, and even around the world," said a spokesman for Pangolin SMS, a software developer, active in that field, based in Orlando, Fla. "It uses the texting technology already embedded in most cell phones, and enables the video display of SMS/MMS messages, including combining messages with other video content, i.e., live feeds, static or animated graphics, and scrolling text," the spokesman told Wireless World. Now that will make for some interesting in-store coupons.

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