Wireless World: Mobile maps

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You're on vacation, and, after a brief walk about town, you realize you can't find your way back to the hotel. Relax. You're not going to be lost for long. Sources tell United Press International's Wireless World that mobile-phone developers and carriers are coming forth with maps you can access from your cell phone, or other ways you can search, or even be found, wirelessly.

"Anyone who needs to get from place to place can access reliable GPS (global positioning system) navigation, using the cell phones they already have, without spending thousands of dollars on an in-car navigation system," said Robert Apatoff, president and chief executive officer of Skokie, Ill.-based mapmaker, Rand McNally.

Makers of portable GPS products, like the Lowrance iWay 350c portable navigation system, which sells for around $400, probably won't be too happy about the low-cost competition.

The Rand McNally product, called the Mobile Navigator (MONA), and others emerging just like it, is free, downloadable from the Internet, and costs just $9.99 per month for a subscription, and transforms your otherwise conventional mobile phone into a turn-by-turn, voice-guided navigation device. Users can even upload the addresses of the locations they will be visiting on vacation, online, and they are automatically fed to the phone.

Carriers are offering content to help consumers search, while on the go, making the map access part of a larger trend. Today, most people can't

imagine traveling across town, let alone across the continent, without their mobile phone, as a sort of digital lifeline, connecting them with the family and associates. Voice activation technologies -- in their infancy with products like the Dragon dictate software back in the 1990s -- are key to the trend.

Wall Street investment bank Piper Jaffray recently indicated that mobile search will generate $11 billion in revenues for wireless carriers in two years. Developers like San Diego-based V-Enable have developed voice search technologies that work in under 1 second, with about a 90-percent accuracy rate. You truly won't be lost for long with that kind of help -- which is also probably more reliable than the teenager working at the filling station that you formerly relied upon for navigation advice.

Another technology that is powering the trend is so-called Flash software, developed by Adobe. The technology enables all sorts of applications commonly found on PCs to be ported over to mobile phones with ease. Mobile-phone developers, using the technology, are making new user interfaces and even screen savers for the small, handheld devices.

Research by Umbria Inc., a firm that studies the opinions of the online community, recently analyzed public opinion on 30 million blogs regarding tier one mobile carriers.

So-called "power users" and "vanity seekers," perhaps those who can't bear to be lost, even for a second, on travel, are the key influencers in new phone purchases and purchases of new applications, the researchers found.

The next step in moving mobility along, however, is even more technologically sophisticated than mere map downloading. The offering of so-called mCommerce, or mobile commerce, applications is an

attempt by the wireless industry to let the mobile phones, in essence, think for consumers. Consumers allow the carriers to have access to their private data -- vacation spot, hotel, interests, date of birth, companions -- for example. This enables total personalization of the mobile phone, without the customer actually having to do anything much. Of course there are reservations about this for security reasons. The research firm Ipsos indicates that 80 percent of consumers have expressed reservations about having their personal information being available in such a manner.

But once security is addressed properly, according to Bohdan Zabawskyj, chief technology officer at Toronto-based developer RedKnee Inc., the "roadblock" to sharing this information will be removed.

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