

Youth are best judges of cellular content

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Downloading cellular content like ringtones, games and wallpaper is getting easier, and for that you have a Swedish 15-year-old to thank.

The young Swede, Tobias, is part of "the Lab," a group of teenagers from around the world employed by mobile content infrastructure firm Mobilitec. The team, which also includes youth from Israel, Egypt, India, Britain and the United States, gets periodic assignments to test products and services, and reports back.

Since the teenagers all use their existing data-enabled cell phones and service providers, some have access to the Mobilitec infrastructure and some do not. "Our goal was to learn about the global user experience, not to just represent the operators with whom we work," the company report on the project said.

"It looks like the 8-to-22 age group are the people that mostly use (cellular) content," Mobilitec's founder and vice president of engineering, Haim Teichholz, told UPI. "They're more open to a new way of consuming information, while older people are more conservative," he said, explaining why the Lab is composed of teenagers.

"Also, most of the content offering targets these ages anyway," Teichholz added.

The group has so far completed one assignment: to download two pre-determined games and two games of their choice, and to play them several times. Teichholz said the Lab returned with some surprising

results.

"A lot of people can't get what they want," he said. "Most of the time, it's there -- it's just not very easy or intuitive to get to it."

In other words, mobile operators and content providers are missing out on revenues because although they provide content their customers want, their interface is such that users can't find it and end up frustrated.

"It was confusing to find the games that I purchased; each one was put into a different folder," 14-year-old Mallory from Britain reported, while 17-year-old American Luke said "The T-Zone (T-Mobile) site was not always available."

"I complained to the customer care manager that there was no information to inform me that games are not downloadable to my Sony Ericsson phone and that I was presented with an offer to buy a gaming package! It also took five days to get a response," a 13-year-old from Israel, Dana, added.

Mobilitec divided the "rants" into five main categories: bad service, couldn't find the game, slow process, too expensive and "where are the brands?"

"Mobile operators start out designing their own interface, with their own look and feel, then find out it's better to use what we're providing because it comes with user experience," Teichholz said.

He added that all of Mobilitec's customers were "really interested to see the findings and how to improve their services."

The next assignment for the kids will be to download several different kinds of content -- ringtones, wallpaper and games, for instance, from a

portal.

There are two ways to get content on your phone: an on-portal site is provided by the mobile operator, and an off-portal site is an external company that deals only with content. Experience in the market says that downloading from the mobile operator is more reliable technically, Teichholz said.

However, the experiment will also test a practice called "bundling" of content. The concept of selling a group of services at a flat or reduced fee is already taking hold in the telecommunications world, where telecom providers offer "triple-play" bundles of cellular, Internet and phone services.

Teichholz explained that in the world of cellular content, bundling is similar to the recommendations on Amazon.com and it will increase impulse downloading.

"The user is exposed to different kinds of mobile experiences," Teichholz said.

Haifa, Israel-based Mobilitec currently serves 300 million subscribers to 22 mobile service providers around the world, including Vodafone in Europe and ESPN Mobile in the United States, a spokesman for the company said.

The company estimates that the global mobile-content market will be worth \$1 billion in 2006.

Technology analysis firm Gartner says "content, fashion and gaming rule" when it comes to consumer trends driving the market. According to a report from the firm's Tel Aviv Telecom, Mobile and Wireless conference held in March, content will include the games and ringtones

consumers are already familiar with, as well as video-on-demand, music and narrowcasting.

Infrastructure will be important in this arena, as will mobile devices' continuing moves to "integrate music, fashion, gaming (and) banking with voice and messaging," the Gartner report said.

Overall, telecommunications revenues from voice use, the traditional role of telecommunication, are falling, according to Gartner. Messaging and content are gaining importance for these companies, and no telecom firm can afford to ignore this importance, the research firm maintains.

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