

Free local TV soon to be available on cell phones

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A Tivit transmitter is shown next to three Apple iPhones at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Tuesday, Jan. 5, 2010. The showroom floor opens on Thursday, Jan. 7, 2010. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma)

(AP) -- The prospect of watching live, local TV shows on mobile phones and other portable devices is getting closer. Manufacturers this week are showing off gadgets can receive a new type of digital TV transmissions.

"Mobile DTV" gadgets will be available this spring for consumers in the Washington, D.C., area to try. The devices include a cell phone made by Samsung Electronics Co. and a Dell Inc. laptop. There's also the Tivit, a device about the size of a deck of cards that receives a TV signal, then rebroadcasts it over Wi-Fi so it can be received by an iPhone or BlackBerry.

The devices are being displayed this week at the International Consumer Electronics show in Las Vegas.

Conventional digital TV broadcasts are designed for stationary antennas. So devices that are moving - because someone's carrying them or because they're in a car - have a hard time getting a picture. The Mobile DTV technology gets around that problem, letting broadcasters add a secondary signal to the towers they use for sending TV signals to homes. About 30 stations have done so in the last year, hoping to reach viewers on the go as gadgets like smart phones gain in prominence.

So far, only prototype devices have been able to receive these new signals. Cell phones, particularly ones with large screens, would be natural devices for Mobile DTV reception, but U.S. carriers have shown little interest in the technology. The two largest ones, AT&T Inc. and Verizon Wireless, sell phones that are compatible with a rival broadcasting system, FLO TV, run by Qualcomm Inc. It provides 10 channels for \$15 per month.

Mobile DTV differs from FLO TV by providing local channels with traffic, weather and sports content, and by being free, at least for some channels. One of the goals of the consumer trial is to figure out how willing consumers will be to pay, according to the Open Mobile Video Coalition, an industry group that represents both broadcasters and equipment makers.

The new Samsung phone is a version of the already available Moment, with an added telescoping antenna for TV reception. It has a screen made of organic light-emitting diodes, providing eye-popping color saturation. Samsung spokesman John Godfrey said about 300 of them will be in consumers' hands in the D.C. area in the first few months of the year.

Phone service will be provided by Sprint Nextel Corp., which doesn't have a deal with FLO TV. But the extent of Sprint's support doesn't yet go very far: it hasn't said that it will sell Mobile DTV phones.

The Tivit approaches the phone market differently: It's a separate device that can beam a TV signal to most Wi-Fi-capable phones. It thus bypasses the cellular carriers. It was originally designed to provide TV viewing to the iPhone in Japan, where TV reception is considered a must for phones. Valups, the Korean company behind the device, said the Tivit will go on sale this spring for about \$120.

LG Electronics Inc., which like Samsung has helped develop the Mobile DTV technology, has said it will introduce a portable DVD player that will also tune in Mobile DTV. It will be available later this year for \$249, it said.

Dell will be supplying hundreds of small laptops for the trial in Washington, and the computer maker believes it will be able to sell Mobile DTV tuners as upgrades for its laptops, said spokesman James Clardy. Dell already sells laptops with the option of a built-in receiver for standard digital TV, for about \$50.

More information: Open Mobile Video Coalition:
<http://www.omvc.org>

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