

iPhone-starved states welcome new gadget

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On the first day that the popular iPhone was available at Verizon stores, Chris Cioban, manager of the Verizon store in Beachwood, Ohio, holds up an iPhone on Thursday, Feb. 10, 2011. (AP Photo/Amy Sancetta)

(AP) -- Katie Elenberger took her doctor's orders for bed rest in stride, especially because her first day of maternity leave coincided with the delivery of her iPhone.

"I've been laying on the couch by my front door all day waiting for the FedEx truck," laughed the expectant mom from her home in Moorhead, Minn. "Getting the iPhone is the highlight of my day."

Elenberger, who works as a graphic designer in Fargo, is among the thousands of people who became iPhone-eligible when AT&T's exclusive deal to carry the Apple gadget ended this week.

Previously excluded from the iPhone club because of AT&T's at-best spotty coverage in this part of the country, cell-phone users in areas of the Dakotas, Montana, Nebraska and Wyoming can now get the phone through the nation's largest wireless carrier, Verizon Wireless.

Verizon says the day it began accepting online orders for the iPhone from existing customers - including Elenberger - produced record sales. The phone became available to the general public on Thursday.

Verizon officials would not release figures on presales, but the manager of one North Dakota outlet said interest was steady ahead of Thursday's rollout.

"The demand is definitely there. A lot of people have been waiting a long time," said Barry Stall, who runs a south Fargo store.

Preston Stahley, a web developer in Billings, Mont., heard people would be camping out at stores Wednesday night, which he said "sounds kind of crazy." Stahley, 29, preordered his iPhone and received it Tuesday.

"I have sort of been waiting for quite a while," he said. "I haven't been redoing my (cell phone) contracts for a couple of years because of all the rumors that have been coming up and going away."

Bob Kelley, regional public relations manager for Verizon, said Wednesday that his store managers in Montana were too busy with the pre-iPhone rush to give interviews to The Associated Press.

Elenberger so eagerly awaited delivery of her iPhone that she knows it arrived "at 3 o'clock sharp" Monday afternoon. Within half an hour, she had transferred her contacts and set up voice mail. She was "2 seconds away" from shutting down her old phone when she was contacted by the AP.

"This should be the last call on my Blackberry," she said.

While one of Elenberger's colleagues, 39-year-old Janelle Kistner, said the iPhone is on her "wish list," another said she was prepared to wait for the two-year contract on her current phone to expire in August.

"I'm in North Dakota. I guess that's the way it's got to go," said Beth Hagemeister, 37, of the long and agonizing wait for the iPhone. "It has been frustrating."

Libby Hall, 25, owned an iPhone when she moved to Fargo from Minneapolis in 2009 after her husband was accepted at graduate school. She jokes that one of her conditions for agreeing to the move was that she would be able to keep the phone, despite the limited service.

"It makes it a lot harder to convince people from out of state that Fargo really is a modern urban center when we don't even have the iPhone, four years after its introduction," she said.

Hall, who works for an advertising and public relations firm, said many of her friends and co-workers chose an Android instead of waiting for the iPhone. She said she's a lover of all things Apple and that she likes the way her iPhone synchronizes with the rest of her devices.

"I have an iMac, iPad, iPod shuffle and an old iPod that was one of my first Apple devices. My husband has a Mac laptop, iPod touch and iPod shuffle," Hall said. "Our house could be an ad for Apple."

Ludvik Herrera, 39, a multimedia specialist in Fargo, said he travels overseas regularly and that Verizon offers only limited international service. He said he will only buy the iPhone if AT&T extends its service in his area.

Amy Grundman, a regional AT&T spokeswoman, said her company is "on track" to launch service in North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota early this year.

Verizon and AT&T, the nation's largest telecommunications company, have long disputed each other's coverage maps, resulting in a tit-for-tat TV ad war and lawsuits that have subsequently been dropped. Verizon has wider domestic network coverage than AT&T does, particularly for the older "3G" wireless broadband. Spokeswoman Karen Smith says the company plans to match that coverage with its faster "4G" network by the end of 2013.

Not every Apple enthusiast is an iPhone convert.

Rob Port, a conservative blogger in western North Dakota, had been touting the features of the iPhone on his Web site. Then he got hooked on his Android.

"I'm just excited to see more access to mobile Internet browsing," Port said. "That's going to be good for my business."

Herrera said he gets most of what he needs from his iPad and doesn't feel the need to be connected all the time.

"I crave more of that human interaction," Herrera said. "If I can actually stop by and visit with somebody, I would rather do that than talking on the phone and texting."

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