

TECH NEWS



Hate Your Cell Company? Start Your Own

[The Associated Press]

[By Bruce Meyerson]

May. 22, 2007 | NEW YORK |

(AP) - Maybe it's time to stop grumbling about your cell phone company and just start your own.

That's what Rod Farthing did, at 2:30 a.m. no less. Oh yeah, it took him just a few minutes to get Farthing Mobile up and running, replete with a selection of national calling plans and cell phone models.

Business is slow so far: Since the April launch, Farthing has signed up two subscribers, himself and his son. But he has two prospects in his wife and another son.

Well no, Farthing didn't actually build a cellular network or develop a billing system and everything else that one needs to run a mobile phone business.

Instead, he created Farthing Mobile through Sonopia, a new "do-it-yourself" service that enables groups and individuals to design their own cell brands with a healthy dose of social networking gone mobile. Sonopia buys air time from Verizon Wireless to provide service, a fact hidden by each group's brand on the phone's screen.

"I don't expect to get rich off of it," said Farthing, 50, a self-described "cell phone junkie" in Toledo, Ohio, who is tailoring his cell service to people interested in technology. He's also using it for a class project in an e-business course he teaches at a local college. "If I get up to 100 members I'll be happy. If I get up to 50 I'll be happy."

Since Sonopia's public launch in early

April, about 1,000 of these customized cell companies have been created, including about 100 by the startup's employees.

A handful have been launched by sizable nonprofit groups such as the National Wildlife Federation, the National Parks Conservation Association, and the American Medical Student Association. Others were started by sports teams like minor league baseball's Long Island Ducks and the Chicago Bandits of the National Pro Fastpitch women's softball league.

But the vast majority of Sonopia's growing roster of wireless communities were started by individuals, families and tiny groups with very specialized interests.

There's "Aviation History Mobile" with 13 members, the 10-member "Mums in Business," the six-member "Bitta Irish Phone Club," the 13-member "Peninsula Skate Crew Mobile," and the five-member "Scrabble Mobile" featuring weekly contests to devise the highest-word score with a set of letter tiles.

Politics, naturally, aren't off limits. There are Sonopias devoted to supporting the presidential ambitions of Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The polls haven't closed, but the latest tally shows "Obama For President Mobile" leading "Hillary Clinton Presidential Campaign" 12 members to ten.

While every tiny cell company adds to the bottom line, nonprofit organizations are a major focus. Sonopia points to the devotion people show for favorite charities, community groups and sports teams as a natural selling point. A small percentage of the monthly phone bill kicks back to the organization, providing an easy way for members to pad their financial support for a cause.

"If you take a cheerleader squad, there is very high affinity. But if you take a big brand like American Airlines, you don't find a lot of American Airlines devotees," said Juha Christensen, a former Microsoft Corp. executive who is the founder and chief executive of Sonopia Corp.

Sonopia provides tools for each community to share information, photos and other multimedia content on the phone, as well as a dedicated Web site that can be accessed by non-subscribers who just want to be part of that community. So far, about two of every three members are phone subscribers, while the rest are Web-only participants.

Flaky as the notion of enabling this odd assortment of tiny wireless "providers" might sound, Sonopia Corp. has drawn \$21.3 million in venture capital, including \$12.7 million raised just a few weeks ago. It won't disclose how many paying customers it currently has, but says its break-even point is about 100,000 subscribers.



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Sonopia gives each virtual cell company from 3% to 8% of the monthly proceeds, depending on how many paying customers they have.

Users can choose from a wide array of individual and family calling plans similar to those offered by the major cell phone companies, starting at \$40 a month for 450 peak minutes with free nights and weekend. Sonopia also offers a set of simplified plans called "Fair & Square," featuring a larger bucket of minutes with no free off-peak periods, such as \$37 for 700 minutes. There's a choice of four handsets, with prices ranging from free with a two-year contract to \$130 with a one-year commitment.

"This particular program is a wonderful opportunity for us to promote and advance the art of animation," Antran Manoogian, president of the International Animated Film

Society, said of the group's newly affiliated cell phone company, "Animation Wireless." Manoogian said he hopes to draw both animation professionals and fans, using the phone to share news and animated video clips.

The American Medical Student Association has signed up 31 of its 70,000 members for AMSA Mobile, which sends users text alerts about matters like application deadlines, said Jay Bhatt, national president and a fourth-year medical student at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine. But he'd like to see AMSA Mobile become an active forum for social networking and blogging.

"What we're trying to do right now is sort out and beef up the content," said Bhatt. There's no telling whether the early rush of people and groups behind Sonopia's

more eclectic wireless brands will actively maintain them beyond the initial jolt of creativity.

No doubt, as with the millions of abandoned Web sites and Web logs launched with bolder intentions, some of these micro-cell providers will be left unattended, overgrown with cyber weeds.

Either way, it appears likely that AT&T Inc. and T-Mobile will survive the onslaught of "Living History Mobile," "Superior Moose Wireless," and "Furious Lunchmeat."

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