



Global Positioning Tools Enable Location Services

By Michael B. Baker

NOVEMBER 06, 2006 -- The "I got lost" excuse is becoming obsolete as business travelers have more ways than ever to get directions at a moment's notice. Hotels and car rental suppliers are expanding their navigation tool offerings, and at the same time, such personal devices as cellular phones are becoming more sophisticated in providing instant access to mapping and directions.

"We're finally seeing the emergence of location-based services," said Norm Rose, president of Travel Tech Consulting in Belmont, Calif. "Wireless service providers have kept a walled garden, allowing you to connect to applications, but the applications that are part of the wireless networks are very guarded positions. Now we're pulling down the walls of that garden."

Verizon Wireless earlier this year upgraded its location-based services, adding the VZ Navigator service. The tool allows users to find a map of their location and get turn-by-turn voice directions to another location either through entering the address or searching for a place by category. Customers access it either by a monthly charge of \$9.99 or a daily charge of \$2.99.

Networks In Motion provides the navigation product to Verizon and, unlike the maps on discs and cards that reside in some global positioning systems, the maps are updated bimonthly, said vice president of marketing Steve Andler. Andler said the product has had a rapid uptake, with hundreds of thousands of users on the system.

"Location services on your phone are going to be just standard next year," Andler said. "You won't be able to buy a phone that doesn't have some sort of location standard."

While the leisure travel applications are obvious, Andler said such tools also are a boon to even the best planners among business travelers. "It's a great productivity tool for traveling business professionals," he said. "Even if you've planned ahead of time, sometimes as soon as you land, the schedule changes, and you suddenly have to get from Point A to Point C. If you can look up your businesses on your cell phone, it doesn't matter."

To that end, other suppliers also have raised their GPS profiles. Rosewood Hotels & Resorts, for example, recently equipped its concierge service with GPS devices. Guests who ask for directions receive a device preprogrammed with the best driving path to that destination.

Other hotels have had similar programs. Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, for example, provided GPS-enabled cellular phones to guests who booked online, during a limited time this summer.

Car rental companies also have enhanced their navigation tool offerings, most recently Avis Budget Group, which introduced a new GPS tool this summer (BTN, July 17). In addition to providing directions to points of interest, Avis Budget's Where2 navigator, provided by Garmin International, also monitors for traffic jams, construction tie-ups and weather delays and can suggest alternate routes if they would save time. In addition, users can integrate their phone if it is Bluetooth compatible, using it to place hands-free calls and retrieve phone numbers from both their personal phone book and the navigator's database of points of interest.

"Having your phone integrated does signal the future for me," Rose said. "With that integration, business travelers by nature will be sure there's some assistance that GPS navigation can provide wherever they go."

GPS technology also has applications in traveler tracking, as companies could be able to see how many employees are in a city and pinpoint their location if an emergency arises. As technology improves,

companies will have to be prepared to address the obvious privacy issues that will arise along with them, Rose said.

The other factor in the emergence of navigation technology tools is the increasing proliferation of wireless hotspots, especially as some entire cities, like Philadelphia and San Francisco, decide to install wireless networks, Rose said. Although a different platform than the standard GPS offerings, the increasing ubiquity of wireless access could be the source of future offerings. However, it's not a VHS vs. Beta question, and ultimately, the market should have room for both platforms, each of which will fit in their own situations.

"At the end of the day, I don't think the business traveler is going to care," Rose said. "All they want is information and to have that information equal some level of increased efficiency and productivity."