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All the directions you need



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Rating: Near perfect; stands out from rest

Purpose: Never lose your way with GPS packaged in a gadget you rarely leave home without: a cell phone.

The lowdown: I'm lost without my car's navigation system. But sometimes, I'm lost even with it. Its antenna doesn't always pick up the GPS signal until five minutes after the car is running and I've already turned the wrong way twice. On cloudy days – forget it. It needs to see the satellite to get my exact location. Other times, it's because the system is three years old and maps are outdated (I opted not to pay the \$99 for updates). It doesn't remember my favorite routes, it crashes a lot, and the touch screen has been touched so much, it caved in.

I know better systems are available, but not on my salary. But then Irvine's **Networks in Motion**, or NIM, reminded me about its service. NIM provides the mapping service for **Verizon Wireless'** VZ Navigator.

As I immersed myself in NIM-land on a recent road trip, I soon relied solely on NIM. My own GPS? Tucked beneath the cup holder.

It took a day to get used to GPS on a phone, a Motorola Razr for this review. The screen was one-fourth the size of my own GPS. I had to type in addresses on the phone's number pad instead of the touch-screen system of my own.

Most annoying, at first, was "Local Search." It didn't know where Magic Mountain was, until I realized I had to type in "Six Flags" first. I wish I could speak the location into the phone, but, no, I had to type everything in – and hope I knew the correct proper name.

But local search grew on me. It offers several categories if you don't know where you're going – from ATMs and gas stations to, strangely specific, Malaysian restaurants!

Once I figured that it would find places to eat based on 1) your location, 2) the road to your destination or 3) around your destination, I got it.

Other things I loved about NIM's service:

1. Offers "modes" of navigation. Switch to pedestrian mode when you don't want to stick to regular traffic on one-way streets. Or, my favorite, pick the "simplest" route instead of the fastest or shortest.
2. After finding a restaurant or other place using "Local Search," you can dial directly. I narrowed down late-night dinner options after calling four restaurants – three that closed before 10 p.m.
3. Audible directions include street names and highways, although not always with the right accent (Suppel-veedah, instead of Sepulveda).

4. Fast service. Cloudy day? No worries. It uses GPS and cellular service to get maps to you. It found my location within seconds of me asking for directions. But when there's no cell-phone service, there's no GPS, as I discovered in Sequoia National Park.
5. Always updated. No extra charges to have the latest maps available.

Verdict: I hope NIM is working on a voice-activated GPS because typing in all those addresses is a pain. And with companies already offering TV and traffic information on cell phones, it seems only a matter of time before NIM integrates traffic information and reroutes users when it detects congestion on the road ahead. When, NIM, when?

Sacrificing screen size and touch-screen usability may be worth the convenience of having GPS on a cell phone. I do recommend buying an extra phone battery. After a long day's worth of navigation, the battery had one bar left.

Also, get directions before starting the car. Using GPS can be dangerous to other drivers if you're fooling around with directions and not concentrating on the road. With NIM's service, you can even plan your trip with multiple stops along the way.

The price may seem high for some – it's \$9.99 a month plus it uses one minute each time it checks in with the Mothership to get your location or download maps and directions. But customers can also opt for \$2.99 a day, a very good deal if you're in a bind. In a week's worth of constant use, I used two hours, though a portion was actual phone calls.

While other navigation services are available from many cell-phone companies, the bad news is that, for now, NIM's version is only for Verizon customers. Sniff sniff.

Price: \$9.99 a month plus airtime charges, or \$2.99 a day.

Best: Fast, sensible features like "simplest" route. Very convenient and affordable.

Worst: A small screen limits visual directions. Also, Verizon users only.

Available: Verizon

More info: verizonwireless.com, networksinmotion.com