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Creative Uses For Mobile Phones Emerging

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Baseball fans might never again miss a pitch while waiting in line for a hot dog. That's the vision of Skybox SMS, a startup in Chicago. The two-year-old company created a service to let sports fans order and pay for food at stadium concession stands by sending text messages from cell phones.

Skybox is testing its system at Northern Illinois University, home of the minor league basketball team Chicago Rockstars. In March, the company plans to launch Skybox in 10 Arena Football League stadiums.

Skybox is among the small, privately owned companies developing creative applications for cell phones. Analysts and industry insiders say these smaller firms will push the wireless industry forward with new features and applications for on-the-go lifestyles. Venerable Silicon Valley venture capitalists such as Sutter Hill Ventures and Sycamore Ventures are sinking hundreds of millions of dollars into these firms, hoping to find their next winner.

"I expect innovation to come from smaller companies with new features and technologies that can leapfrog what exists today," said Ted Ridgway of investment bank Seven Hills Partners in San Francisco.

In the short term, the most popular features will be niche applications that conform to the spontaneous, last-minute nature of using mobile phones today, Ridgway says. Examples include using cell phones to find reviews of local restaurants and parking garages while driving through a new city.

Soon, he says, mobile devices will be used to perform Web searches, view video clips and participate in online communities.

"Most of what people do today on their home PC, they'll eventually do on a cell phone," he said.

Exclaim Wireless wants to make it easier for people to create and share digital photo albums online. The company's Pictavision subscription service automatically posts photos shot with a cell phone camera to personal blogs or any of 15 photo-display Web sites, including **Yahoo's** ([YHOO](#)) Flickr.

Exclaim users can also arrange photos in an album, transfer them to other sites and add "voice tags," which are like oral captions — all with a cell phone. In January, the company plans to announce a deal with **Walgreen** ([WAG](#)) to let users send photos from a cell phone to the drugstore chain for developing.

Jiren Parikh, Exclaim's vice president for wireless systems, says Pictavision works on 140 handset models, including those from **Motorola**, ([MOT](#)) **Nokia**, ([NOK](#)) Samsung and Sony Ericsson.

By January, Parikh expects Pictavision to be available on 15 U.S. wireless networks as well as overseas through carriers such as Orange and **Vodafone**. ([VOD](#)) The company won't say how many users it has. But Parikh says membership has been growing by 15% per month.

Networks in Motion of Irvine, Calif., hopes to sport equally impressive adoption numbers. The 47-employee company developed an application to provide directions to users of GPS-enabled cell phones.

Co-founders Michael and Angie Sheha met at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., where they worked on wireless communications systems. After getting married, the two electrical engineers set up Networks in Motion to develop navigational software.

The resulting location service — called NAVBuilder — is available for monthly subscriptions from U.S. and Canadian cell phone service providers. In the U.S., it powers the location services Axxcess from **Alltel** ([AT](#)) and VZ Navigator from Verizon Wireless. **Telus**, ([TU](#)) the Canadian wireless carrier, uses it for Telus Navigator and Kid Find, a service to let parents use cell phones to stay aware of their children's location.

Verizon Wireless and Alltel say their service provides information on more than 13 million ATMs, hotels, restaurants, gas stations, cinemas and other points of interest.

Every three months, NAVBuilder refreshes its listing of street names and points of interest. Competing vehicle-based systems, by contrast, rely on information stored in a device at the time of manufacture. What's more, having the system on a handheld lets people get directions or place names while on foot rather than behind the wheel.

Despite the technical achievements of these companies and their success in getting funding, more revolutionary applications are years away, Seven Hills' Ridgway says. What's holding the industry back, he says, is getting the cell phone carriers to support new services.

"Over the next couple of years, I would expect service providers to have networks that can support richer applications," Ridgway said. "But for really explosive new media functionality, we're going to have to wait a while."

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