

Review: Verizon VZ Navigator

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Even with the declining prices of portable GPS navigation devices, the cost for entry-level systems still hovers around \$250. If you want high-end features such as text-to-speech conversion and a decent POI (Points of Interest) database, you could easily end up spending double that figure. The good news is you do have options. In fact, you probably already own all of the hardware you need for turn-by-turn directions: your cell phone.

A number of wireless carriers have added GPS-based navigation as one of their services available by subscription. VZ Navigator by Verizon Wireless is one such offering. Verizon Wireless partnered with Networks In Motion (NIM) to market a customized version of NIM's AtlasBook as VZ Navigator.

The underlying architecture of cell phone-based navigation is quite different from that used by a dedicated GPS device that sits on your dashboard. First, it uses triangulation from cell towers to establish your position, not a satellite fix. Of course, that means it relies on your cellular service. Testing the service in the Northeast United States, where Verizon's coverage is very strong, I had no problems getting and keeping a steady lock.

With dedicated global-positioning systems, the application, maps, and POIs all reside in the device. In addition, every route calculation is done locally. With cell phone-based navigation, the architecture is essentially a client-server solution. Your cell phone, the client, has limited processing power, limited memory, and, for the most part, limited display capabilities. But those shortcomings don't matter all that much, because all of the maps, POIs, route calculations, and the rest are processed by Network In Motion's servers. Your route is calculated for you and then sent to your phone along with maps, and yes, even speech files that provide you with spoken street names. One huge advantage to this approach is since all of the data is stored on centralized servers, your cell phone always has access to the most up-to-date maps as well as a huge database of 11 million POIs.

Compared with the price of a dedicated GPS system, the Verizon Wireless VZ Navigator service is pretty modest. Verizon offers a free trial for 14 days. After that, you can use the service on a daily as-needed basis for \$2.99 a day or subscribe for unlimited use for \$9.99 a month. There is one serious gotcha, however. If you don't have a wireless data plan, you will use air-time minutes that are not included in the per-day or monthly subscription. According to a representative I talked with at Verizon Wireless, you won't use a lot of air time, but you will eat up some. That's because anytime the phone needs to contact the network for information, say for a route recalculation because of a missed turn, the air time it uses will be charged to your account. If you're an occasional user, you'll probably want to keep tabs on your minutes so that you don't get an unpleasant surprise when your bill arrives. If you already subscribe to V-Cast (\$15 a month) for videos, news, and Web browsing, air time for VZ Navigator is covered by your subscription. To get started, you need a compatible phone. To see if your phone qualifies, check out this link at VerizonWireless.com. The site also has both an interactive demo and a demo you can just watch.

I first looked at cell phone-based navigation several years ago. I was not impressed with the first generation of products. But a lot has changed since then. Cellular networks now carry data at much higher speeds. Network latency is much lower these days. And most significantly, the new

cell phones have significantly improved processing power. All of this adds up to a much better user experience.

The user interface on the VZ Navigator is quite different from the one on most dedicated GPS devices. Many cell phones lack a touch screen, so the VZ UI makes generous use of the left and right soft keys, directional button, and the "CLR" and "OK" keys. For phones with standard keypads, letters are entered using the traditional cell-phone method. For example, to enter the letter "b," you tap the "abc" key twice. My test unit, however, was the LG VX9800, the predecessor to the LG eNV, and it had a full QWERTY keyboard that greatly facilitated entering street and city names.

You enter VZ Navigator from the "Get Going" option on the "Get it Now" menu. The main screen has entries for Navigation, Local Search, My Places, Maps, and help. The right soft key, often used for Options, brings up your preferences from the main menu. Preference options include General Preferences (English/Metric, Heads up in follow me, Show recent/favorite icons, and Show place coordinates); Navigation preferences (male or female voice, routing preferences, prompts, volume, and show next turn); Turn Maps; and Display themes. I was pleasantly surprised to see that VZ Navigator has a complete set of routing options, including fastest, shortest, and simplest. It also comes with vehicle profiles for Car/Motorcycle, Truck, Bicycle, and Pedestrian. You can choose to avoid highways, toll roads, and roads with HOV lanes.

From the main Navigation menu, you can find a destination, plan a trip (including start and end points), or use the one-button access for "Home" or "Work". When you select Find Destination, you'll be able to see recent searches, saved favorites, enter an address, find an airport, or locate an intersection. Each menu item is numbered, so you can select the menu item by pressing the corresponding number, or by scrolling down with the rocker key and using the "OK" key to select.

On the Road with VZ Navigator

Once you choose a destination, VZ Navigator connects with the server and requests a route. The route data is calculated based on your preferences and returned to the phone. A route-overview map is available, as well as a list of turns. I was happy to see that the navigation screen is loaded with information. At the top of the screen is the name of the next street. Below that are a turn icon and the distance to the next turn. Below that is the name of your current street. The next line down shows your estimated trip time. At the bottom of the screen there are three data fields that show trip distance, the direction you're heading in, and GPS health. In this view, the "OK" button becomes that "Talk" key. At any time, you can press the "Talk" key and it will announce your next turn. As you approach an upcoming turn, the screen displays a detailed view of your next maneuver, along with a graphical indication of your distance to the turn.

One feature that I especially like is VZ Navigator's text-to-speech conversion, which pronounces the names of streets for the upcoming turns. The directions were complete and issued at an appropriate time prior to your turn. An example of a spoken command would be, "Prepare to exit the highway in point two miles for highway three east." A good implementation of text-to-speech is especially important in a cell-phone GPS, as phones tend to have much smaller screens than dedicated GPS units.

I also appreciated the large POI database. Networks in Motion claims that there are over 11 million entries in it. Indeed, when I searched near my home, I was surprised to learn just how many of my neighbors had businesses established in their homes. Finding a POI was quite simple. You can search all categories, by name if you wish, or search individual categories and in some cases, subcategories. One category not seen on too many GPS devices is movies: VZ Navigator provides a list of nearby theaters. As with most POIs, once you select something of interest, you merely have to hit "send" to call the associated phone number.

I ran a number of test routes, both simulated routes and ones that I actually drove. These routes were similar to other routes generated by GPS devices that were based on Navteq data, the data provider for NIM. I did encounter one data error on one route, but that's not VZ Navigator's problem: The error was the same one I've run into on other GPS products.

Overall, I found VZ Navigator easy to use. It's an affordable alternative to more expensive dedicated GPS nav systems, as long as your phone qualifies and you're comfortable shelling out the subscription fees.