Just watch what's coming

Video, location tracking get top billing at wireless show

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The evolution of mobile phones from, well, mobile phones to pocket-size infotainment centers will probably accelerate this week at America's biggest mobile telecommunications trade show.

CTIA Wireless 2007, in Orlando, Fla., will probably produce two main story lines, exhibitors and analysts agree – more location tracking and more video.

"We're finally going to show people how much is possible with mobile broadband," said Hakan Ericsson, chief technology officer at LM Ericsson Telephone Co., the Swedish telecom giant that employs 1,500 people at its North American headquarters in Plano.

More than 90 percent of cellphones from Verizon Wireless and Sprint Nextel Corp. already use tracking chips for 911 and other emergency calls, but the technology can also help roving users find nearby friends and services.

Pretend, for example, you're dining with friends in an unfamiliar neighborhood and you decide to see the new movie *300.* You could find local theaters and times by googling "300" and the restaurant's address or ZIP code. Problem is, you probably don't know either, which is where tracking technology comes in.

You'll just type in "300," and your phone will pinpoint the best theater and show time. (It will know if you can make a show because it will know how long you'll need to get from restaurant to theater in current traffic conditions.) The phone will then direct you turn by turn to your destination, just like an automobile navigation system.

An early form of the technology is already sold by a California company called Networks in Motion, which powers Verizon's VZ Navigator.

"We've been out there for a little while now, but they're just starting to make a real marketing push," said vice president Steve Andler, who foresees ever more powerful services.

"I think friend and family tracking will be the next big thing. Everyone will want to know where their kids are at any given point. Younger people will also want a way to track friends. ...

"Imagine how much more frequently you'd see people if your phone let you know whenever you were close to them around lunchtime," he said. "Imagine how much easier it would be to meet for a night out if phones directed you to friends."

Although Verizon and Sprint are the only carriers that already have tracking chips inside most phones, others will probably follow suit, particularly if Texas Instruments Inc. succeeds with a new chip it introduced Monday and will begin selling early next year.

"It's tiny. It's affordable. And it provides very quick and accurate information," said Mike Yonker, TI's director of strategic marketing. "And the technology will continue to get smaller, cheaper and better. We're only at the very beginning of this."

Mobile video is another technology that remains in its infancy, but it may be growing even more rapidly.

The nation's two largest mobile carriers, Cingular and Verizon Wireless, have already signed up with one system.

Verizon customers in several cities, including Dallas, can now watch V Cast Mobile TV, a service that pipes eight broadcast and cable channels to compatible phones. (Watch for a V Cast review in Friday's business section.)

Cingular, which is undergoing a name change to AT&T, will begin a similar service in select markets late this year.

Some analysts expect both companies to announce major expansions to the service during the show, which runs from today till Thursday. They also expect some announcements from other carriers such as Sprint and T-Mobile, which could unveil their plans for mobile television.

What, you may ask, would be the point of watching anything on such tiny screens?

Actually, existing monitors perform reasonably well, and phone makers are scrambling to find new technologies that work far, far better.

Some companies, such as Universal Display Corp. in Ewing, N.J., are working on plastic screens that would roll up like window shades into tiny cylinders. These screens, made of organic light emitting diodes or OLEDs, use less power and

produce better pictures than anything available today, but problems with lifespan and efficient production have kept them from mass markets.

Another potential solution comes from Texas Instruments, which demonstrated an experimental projector on Monday that is small enough to fit inside a cellphone. The prototype can beam a high-quality picture onto a piece of paper or any other makeshift screen of similar size.

Engineers from the company don't know exactly when such a product will hit the market, but they think it will revolutionize video.

"It will get smaller and brighter and much more energy-efficient over the coming months, and it will hit the market as something entirely new," said Frank Mozio, who heads worldwide marketing and development for TI's front-projecting DLPs. "It will offer people a way to gather round and watch any video in a compelling format no matter where in the world they are."