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By LLOYD VRIES AP November 21, 2003, 7:41 AM

Pagers Become Lifeline For Deaf



Brian Blaisdell, 15, from Pascoag, R.I., a student at the Rhode Island School for the Deaf holds up a T-Mobile Sidekick Nov. 6, 2003, in Providence, R.I. Cell phone-size messaging gadgets like the BlackBerry and the T-Mobile Sidekick have caught on quickly with the deaf, giving them freedom to move around and communicate like never before. (AP Photo/Victoria Arcoho) / AP

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When Cary Barbin's car broke down at 2 a.m. on a remote road in New Jersey, But Barbin wasn't helpless. He took out his BlackBerry wireless pager and typed an e-mail to a hearing friend, who called the tow truck.

Barbin, 35, researches technologies for the deaf at Gallaudet University, a Washington-based school for the deaf and hard of hearing, but he didn't have an e-mail pager just because he's a techie.

Cell phone-size messaging gadgets like the BlackBerry and the T-Mobile Sidekick have caught on quickly with the deaf since being introduced a few years ago, giving them freedom to move around and communicate like never before.

"I talk to my friends almost everyday with the pager. It is really great!" said Bryan Blaisdell, a deaf 15-year-old in Pascoag, R.I. He uses his Sidekick to message his parents for rides, and can stay in touch with them when he's out, things that would have been hard or impossible a few years ago.

The pagers have become even more important to the deaf than cell phones are for the hearing, since the deaf can't use regular phones or pay phones.

"Before, you were set to a strict plan that was set in advance. There was no way to change the plan if somebody was running late," said Joe Karp, director of marketing at Wynd Communications, one of a couple of companies that specialize in selling wireless services to the deaf.

Wynd, which is based in San Luis Obispo, Calif., started out selling e-mail pagers to corporate travelers. But in 1997, the company got an e-mail from a deaf lawyer, who pointed out that the pagers were great for the deaf.

"We began to explore the opportunity, and found that there was a decent-size market — 28 million deaf or hard of hearing in the U.S.," Karp said.

This month, Wynd introduced a service that makes its pagers more useful in communicating with the hearing. Users can now send text messages to human operators, who call a hearing recipient on the phone and read the message. The recipient can then tell the operator to send a message back to the deaf person's pager.

The human operator is part of a state-mandated relay service designed for older equipment known as TTY machines. These can send and receive text messages through regular phone lines. Of course, lugging around these machines, which look like electronic typewriters, and plugging them into phone lines hasn't been an attractive option for the deaf.

In some ways, the pagers even take the part of the radio for the deaf. Users can subscribe to services that send news and traffic reports, or tips on where closed-captioned movies are playing. The pager network in New York helped the deaf understand what was happening during the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Barbin said.

In one important area, however, the e-mail pagers fall behind cell phones in usefulness — you can't use them to call 911 directly. Like Barbin, in emergencies the deaf typically e-mail or message a hearing friend or family member, and have them make the call.

Deaf people can call 911 from cell phones with TTY features, but since cell phones are of little use to the deaf otherwise, they're not very popular.

"The whole area of messaging and 911 needs to be examined, and the emergency number professionals in the U.S. are beginning to do so," said Judy Harkin, director of the Technology Access Program at Gallaudet.

The police department in Sacramento, Calif., may be showing the way. It started accepting "911" e-mails in February.

The service is intended for the city's deaf, but it clearly fills an unmet need. Deaf people from as far away as Los Angeles and Texas have sent in e-mails asking Sacramento police to relay emergency information to their local authorities, according to dispatcher Vera Hill.

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