Green Cell Phones and Mobile Skype Finally Arrive

Editors’ Intro

In this issue, we cover the new green cell phones, a universal charger, cellular femtocells, Skype on mobile phones, a service that turns on street lights from your phone, and a de-identify caller ID. Please continue to send pointers to upcoming products with exciting possibilities, your feedback on existing products, and your personal experiences along with them (your name will be included with your review). Email us at pvcproducts@computer.org.

—Mark Corner and Maria Ebling

Devices

PhonES for PlanEt Earth
Samsung has introduced a green cell phone called Blue Earth (www.samsung.com). The device is made from recycled water bottles and features back-mounted solar panels and an internal pedometer. It’s free of substances such as brominated flame retardants, beryllium, and phthalate. The phone is packaged in recycled paper and the charger isn’t an energy vampire, using less than 0.03 watts in standby mode. This phone’s technology has the potential to make smartphones more accessible in developing countries where the power grid is less stable than in developed countries. Geared toward the two billion people with limited or no electrical access, the phone will be available in the United Kingdom starting in June. We should mention that Digicel and ZTE also announced a solar-powered phone.

Universal Chargers
The mobile phone industry has done travelers the world over a major service. The GSMA trade association recently announced that the world’s leading handset manufacturers have agreed to standardize on a common charger: the Micro-USB technology. LG, Motorola, Nokia, Samsung, and Sony Ericsson will all use this technology. They expect that most phones will be using the Micro-USB charger by the year 2012. Disappointingly, Apple isn’t on the list, though we still hold out hope that it will get on the green boat. Now, why can’t laptop manufacturers agree to something similar? This isn’t rocket science!

AT&T 3G Microcell
Weak mobile signal in your home? Your hotel room? The arrival of cellular femtocells might solve your problem. Products such as the AT&T 3G Microcell use a standard broadband connection to route your cellular phone calls and data. AT&T’s offering claims to cover 5,000 square feet and support up to four simultaneous users. The Microcell even supports seamless handoff of calls when leaving the device’s range. No word on pricing yet, but we all know a few people living in cellular holes that will be willing to pay.

Services

Mobile Skype
Finally, the moment so many have been waiting for. Beginning in the third quarter of this year, Skype will
Nokia has announced that it will begin shipping its upcoming Nseries phones with Skype preloaded and integrated into the device. Users will be able to make free Skype-to-Skype phone calls over the Internet from any 3G cellular network or Wi-Fi network. They also will be able to see when their contacts are online and will be able to use Skype’s instant messaging client. This feature will perhaps be most valuable to people traveling overseas because it will give them an alternative to the expensive international calling rates available on today’s cellular service plans. But those in the US shouldn’t hold their breath, the buzz on the ‘Net suggests that US cellular providers will rip out this feature before shipping.

**PHONE IN FOR LIGHTS**

Clever city managers in Germany are starting to tighten the belt on energy usage from overhead lighting on walking paths, sports fields, and even dark streets. By using technology from dial-4light, pedestrians can make a phone call to turn on the lights. To discourage abuse and to assign the costs of energy intensive lighting, certain municipalities will charge users for turning on lights. One concern is whether safety will be compromised if people can’t—or won’t—pay for lighting while walking alone at night. Although it’s hard to imagine using this while driving, it seems like it could save cities a lot of money on their lighting bills. Just don’t forget your phone when heading off to midnight football!

**DE-IDENTIFY CALL ID**

If you receive calls on your mobile phone that caller ID lists as blocked, there’s now a solution to that problem. By signing up for a new service from TrapCall, you can unmask callers. Although exact details on how it works are scant, it appears to use conditional call-forwarding to send the call to TrapCall, which then finds the true caller and forwards the call back to you. While that service is free, TrapCall also offers a paid service that can record your phone calls and transcribe your voice mail. They do warn that recording your calls might not be legal in your state. Right now, the service only works on AT&T and TMobile phones in the US, but the company claims to be working on expanded coverage. Oddly, the company also suggests that you can really block your own calls using something called SpoofCard. It seems as if the caller ID arms race will continue.