

# It's a high-tech life

by Doug West



Today's youth culture is marked by technology, and has the acronyms to prove it. PS2, PDA, IM, SMS, P2P, MP3 are just a few of the abbreviations to emerge in recent years that point to this new reality—not to mention the prefix "e" and the use of the oft-ignored ampersand @. But at the hub of this technological tempest are cell phones, which promise to keep us accessible, connected, secure and entertained.

American adults expressed their feelings of ambivalence about cell phones, as evidenced by the results of a recent survey (Lemelson-MIT Invention Index), where 30 percent called them the most-hated and needed invention. Yet, despite this vacillation, cell phones continue to flourish. Culture is adapting to the cell phone's presence by adopting measures to curtail cell phone use at movie theatres, schools, churches and elsewhere. Given the growing prominence and increased placement of what is quickly becoming the staple in the tech-savvy teen's diet, CPYU offers the following information and analysis on cell phones in the lives of today's tweens (ages 8-12) and teens.

## Adoption rates and revenue streams

Enter the world of youth and an undeniable reality quickly becomes evident—cell phones are everywhere. To see just how pervasive cell phones are, conduct an informal survey of the youth in your unique ministry setting and compare the results with what the researchers are finding. The Yankee Group says 56 percent of 11-17 year-olds own or share a cell phone (*New York Times*, 3/18/04). Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU) reports that 45 percent of 12-19 year-old youth have a cell phone (*USA Today*, 6/6/03). Either way, lots of kids own and use cell phones.

The cell phone market was estimated at \$100 billion with 520 million units sold and approximately 159 million users in 2003, according to Gartner research group (Reuters, 3/10/04). Ring tones—digital versions of popular songs—generated \$3.5 billion in global sales in 2003 (Reuters, 1/13/04). According to research firm IDC, 9.9 million people downloaded a ring tone in 2003, up from 4.8 million in 2002 (csmonitor.com, 1/30/04). IDC also reports that Americans tallied \$57 million in ring tone sales in 2003, up from \$16 million in 2002 (*Time*, 12/29/03-1/5/04).

## Features

Cell phones, like any other technological gadget, have experienced enormous change over recent years. Increasingly powerful and functional, cell phones offer elaborate and sophisticated games, ring tones, cameras and more. As technological advancement continues to revolutionize cell phones, it also simultaneously expands the extent and reach of media—for better or worse—in the lives of today's youth. Concerned adults should take particular note of this trend and use it as an opportunity to engage youth in their media consumption patterns and lifestyle choices.

The most prominent and noticeable feature of cell phones is the ring tone. No longer confined by conformity, ring tones are considered to be a form of expression. In fact, a recurring YMobile ad has as its tag line, "express yourcell!" The ad also features the top 10 most popular ring tones of mainstream pop music artists. There are numerous Internet sites that allow teens to seek out and download their favorite ring tones.

Another common feature is text messaging, or "SMS" (Short Message Service), which is the cell phone version of instant messaging that allows users to send and receive shorthand messages with thumb typed

keystrokes. According to Teenage Research Unlimited, 37 percent of youth use text messaging (*USA Today*, 6/6/03).

Camera phones are one of the latest and most controversial cell phone features. While the picture quality is typically poor—but improving—many people and companies, citing privacy and copyright concerns, are taking issue with the improper use of images captured on these phones, and denying their access.

Internet and e-mail access and computer games are also being made available on cell phones.

### **Cheating**

As with any other invention, cell phones have the potential for misuse and abuse, and can serve to foil or facilitate cheating. On the positive side, a Nokia "Spy Cam" (picture phone) ad shows a mosaic of camera phone images of a guy frolicking with various females with the tag line, "Didn't Jake tell you he was studying?" In this example, technology provides a valuable function of accountability.



On the down side however, an LG print ad highlights the growing moral relativism in today's youth culture, but also points out how technology can be used for dubious ends. The ad shows a cartoon female standing next to a phone with the tag line, "Different rings for different boyfriends. Technology can be so naughty."

In addition to the use of cell phones in dating relationships is how they are used in the classroom. Students have been caught cheating on tests using text messaging. Now with the advent of camera phones, teachers have to respond to a whole new set of challenges. Many schools have adopted rules to ban cell phones in the classroom.

### **"Handle with care!"**

Beyond cheating, there are other areas of concern with cell phone use.

Driving a car while talking on a cell phone is a serious safety issue, particularly for teens, who, though accustomed to multi-tasking, are inexperienced behind the wheel. Cell phones also afford teens the opportunity to gossip on a grander scale, and gives bullies another means to torment and tease their victims. Invasion of privacy is another possible problem as camera phones enable people to act like "paparazzi" by intruding on the lives of friend or foe and distributing the images quickly and easily via e-mail and the Internet.

Clearly cell phones are the proverbial blessing and curse, offering numerous benefits but with accompanying drawbacks. Parents, educators and concerned adults would do well to "consider the cost" and think through the multi-faceted issues related to cell phone initiation, and, if deemed appropriate, to lovingly establish limits on their use.

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