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Product line

on 31 July 2000, 22:00
by Niall McKay



If **Motorola** has its way, the new Talkabout T900 two-way pager will be the communications device to have in schools and colleges in the fall semester. What's supposedly rad is that it comes in nice colors: Razberry Ice, Totally Teal, and Mystic Blue. So, too, is Mariah Carey's accompanying ad campaign with attitude. Says Motorola spokeswoman Josephine Posti: "Mariah signs her Talkabout pagers 'The Hardest-Working Bitch in the Industry.'" What sucks, in the juicy vernacular of young customers, is the price. Mariah may have to work even harder to convince teens and tweens to hit up parents for the dough to buy this device. It costs around \$200, and then there's the \$20 per month service fee. For that, why not buy a cell phone? After all, these days you can pick one up for around \$40 and get 100 minutes of airtime for \$20 a month. But price probably won't be a barrier. I'm sure that the pager service providers -- **Skytel**, **PageNet** (OTC: PAGE), and **Metrocalt** -- will cough up subsidies.

As pagers go, the palm-size T900 is not bad. But think of it as more of a pocket-size email terminal than a pager. The T900 has a full QWERTY keyboard, 128 K of storage, and can send and receive email and text messages. It also has a "mega" (250-entry) address book and the ability to capture news and information feeds. Couple these functions with the "private time" feature, which lets high-school students choose times that the pager will operate silently -- during study hall, for example -- and you're getting close to a device that kids may actually want.

What's most annoying about this pager isn't the device itself but the ploy that's used to capture the youth market. It rings tinny -- rather like your father going platinum blond. I'm not sure how many teens will use the online news and stock-quote information. But I'm certain that the kids will have a little more imagination than the adult marketing dolts who pitch the feature as "building a future."

My instinct is that kids are smarter than the marketing folks, who, bless them, seem to be under the impression that Mariah Carey is the epitome of cool.

Like most portable consumer electronics devices, pagers need to cater to fashion as well as function. But charging extra for phones, personal digital assistants, MP3 players -- and pagers -- just for slapping on a little colored plastic is getting a little tired. **Apple Computer** got away with it with the iMac, but it was the first to do so. Apple also had the good sense to completely redesign the computer instead of just taking an existing design and painting it wacky colors.

If Motorola really wants to be cool, it should mimic Swatch, or at least try to come up with a design that's slightly different. Still, the company is right about one thing. There's life still in paging networks. For years, analysts have predicted the death of pagers as the cell phone market has taken off. (Most digital cell phones can function as pagers, too.)

But email has provided pager providers with a new lease on life, mostly because the U.S. cellular telephone infrastructure is not what it should be. Carriers simply cannot agree on a standard that will provide interoperability, and vast areas of the United States have no cell phone service at all. In Europe, where GSM prevails as the cellular standard, pagers are passé. No self-respecting teen would be caught dead trying to send text messages to their mates on anything but the latest short message service cell phone.

Motorola is correct in assuming that kids these days like text messaging nearly as much as talking on the telephone. A few months ago, in Ireland, I tried to contact a nun, now 80, who was my teacher in grade school. My school had been converted into a hotel (that's the progress of the Celtic Tiger for you), and when I rang the convent to locate Sister Joseph Patricia, I was told that she could be reached on her cell phone. Sister Joseph Patricia is not big on text messaging, but she told me when I caught up with her at her new school that her 10-year-old students couldn't get enough GSM short messaging.

Most kids have cell phones and send their parents messages during the day from school. When doing homework, they email questions from their Web browser to their friends' cell phones. That way they can chat (or cheat) for a fraction of the cost of

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calling each other.

The T900 is just one offering in Motorola's long list of mobile communications products aimed at the young. Later this year, the company plans to release pagers that double as MP3 players and PDAs, as well as some that will even play streaming audio. An MP3-PDA-pager combo? Now you're talking cool.

Niall McKay is a contributing editor at Red Herring. Write to niall@redherring.com.

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