
The Future Is Now For Wireless



Five years ago, *Agency Sales* magazine ran an article on wireless phones that only hinted at the possibilities now being realized. In 1999, we reported that “the new generation of wireless phones with high-speed connections to the Internet is coming soon. Mobile phone users will be able to use their phones as stand-alone Internet devices for e-mail or plug them into laptops and other devices using a separate modem. In addition to Internet access and e-mail, the new systems could eventually offer video conferencing. Future generation phones will essentially be small computers offering voice and data and many enhanced services.”

The day that was hinted at five years ago has come, and now we’re faced with a present and a future that offers much more. For instance, consider the following news items that have recently appeared in the press:

- Fredericton, Canada has decided to expand its free city wireless broadband. The city council recently approved another phase of the project, which will be twice as big as the first phase and is slated for completion by the end of 2006.
- The Philadelphia city government recently announced that it will launch a citywide wireless network by the spring of 2006. The plan is to mount up to 16 Wi-Fi (see *Wireless Glossary*, page 19) routers per square mile on streetlights in order to provide “some level of free wireless Internet access to everyone living, working or visiting the city.” Boston, Massachusetts, and Madison, Wisconsin, are also considering free citywide Wi-Fi.
- Wireless phone service is one of the great bargains of the modern age. When *The Washington Post* began its annual comparison of cellular calling plans in 1998, \$40 bought a lousy 100 minutes of talk time a month. Now that same bill will provide 600 peak minutes, plus unlimited night and weekend minutes — about 24,000 in all.
- Dennis Tseng is an avid Web surfer who loves to

hang out in Taipei's upmarket Hsinyi district, where wireless Internet access is freely available to all. It's the love of this kind of connectivity that is driving Taipei city planners to build what they say will be the world's biggest Wi-Fi network, making cheap, wireless Internet access available almost everywhere in the Taiwan capital.

Taken as individual reports, each of the above items might serve as a curious note of our times. Combined, however, they are indicative of a definite trend, one that is impacting the lives of independent manufacturers' representatives on a daily basis.

To learn more about Wi-Fi and how it is affecting the lives of the outsourced field sales profession, we contacted a number of people who have already begun their trip on the wireless "learning curve." To begin, MANA's Jay Ownby conducted some of his own research on the subject and put together his thoughts on the trend.

Wireless and the Real World of the Rep

According to Ownby, MANA's manager of strategic alliances, imagine that you're on the road.

- You just finished a call and you need to send an e-mail before your principal goes home for the day; or
- You're pulling into the customer's parking lot and you need to download a data sheet that you just realized you left at the office; or
- You're expecting a quote by e-mail that you need for the next call; or...

You know there are several options for accessing the Internet while on the road. You've heard other reps talk about them, but you don't have a clue what hardware and software are required, how much they cost, how well they work, or how to sign up even if you did know.

Well, it turns out there are indeed a number of options, including hardware and software options, and performance/cost tradeoffs. If there is a single source for the information needed to make a selection, I haven't found it. However, thanks to a discussion at an ERA Rep Firm Owners Forum, I was prompted to look into the situation. I found the information available was often poorly presented and confusing. I worked through a half-dozen or so web sites and came up with a reasonably good summary of the options available. The following is not intended to be complete or even absolutely accurate, and some of the

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Jay Ownby



information may be out of date by the time you read this. However, it's a start. You really can do just about anything on the Internet while on the road that you can do from your office — you just have to decide how much equipment you want to buy and how much you want to spend for service.

At one extreme, you can actually send and receive e-mail and access web sites using only your cell phone. And it's cheap — only about \$5 monthly (plus airtime). But it's slow, and the display capability for web sites on a cell phone screen is obviously limited.

At the other extreme, a notebook computer with wireless capability can do everything you can do with your desktop computer, and just as fast, for about \$80 monthly. The only problem with this option is that it's currently available only in about a dozen major metropolitan areas, and only from Verizon for now.

Between these two extremes are a number of options, summarized below:

Dialup (Cell Phone Only) — Access the Internet directly from your cell phone.

- Advantages
 - o Cost — \$5 per month
- Disadvantages
 - o Slow — 14.4 kbps
 - o Limited display capability
 - o Uses airtime

Dialup (Cell Phone & Notebook) — Dial your ISP from your cell phone, connected to your notebook computer.

- Advantages
 - o One-time cost of \$30 for a Mobile Office Kit

- o Works anywhere your cell phone works
- Disadvantages
 - o Slow — 14.4 kbps
 - o Uses airtime

Free Broadband Hot Spots (PDA or Notebook & PCMCIA Card) — 802.11 wireless Internet access from free hot spots.

- Advantages
 - o Fast — >500 kbps
- Disadvantages
 - o Hot spots not often in convenient locations

Wide Area Wireless (PDA or Notebook & PCMCIA Card) — Uses PCMCIA Card to connect to the Internet from almost anywhere your cell phone works. Available from most major cell phone services.

- Advantages
 - o Available anytime, anywhere
 - o Faster than dialup — typically 40-60 kbps
- Disadvantages
 - o Slower than Broadband
 - o Cost — \$80 per month

Commercial Broadband Hot Spots (PDA or Notebook & PCMCIA Card) — 802.11 wireless Internet access from hot spots provided by T-Mobile, among others.

- Advantages
 - o Fast — >500 kbps
- Disadvantages
 - o Available only at specific locations (T-Mobile)
 - Most Starbucks
 - Most Borders
 - Most Kinko's
 - o Cost (T-Mobile)
 - \$6 for one hour
 - \$10 for 24 hours
 - \$40 for one month
 - \$30 per month for 12 months

Wide Area Broadband (PDA or Notebook & PCMCIA Card) — 802.11 wireless Internet access in major metropolitan areas. Will be available from most major cell phone services.

- Advantages
 - o Fast — 300-500 kbps
 - o Available in all major metropolitan areas (when rollout is complete)
- Disadvantages
 - o Cost — \$80 per month
 - o Currently available only in San Diego and Washington, D.C. areas (Verizon)
 - o Availability will be limited to metropolitan areas

Note: A PCMCIA card is not required for newer notebook computers with Intel(r) Centrino™ Mobile Technology.

Reps Cite Experience

What Ownby describes is certainly a start. Two MANA members, however, report that they've already passed "start" and are well on their way to enjoying the benefits that wireless communication offers them and their agencies.

Roger Diamond, Technology Sales & Marketing, LLC, Indianapolis, Indiana, looks back over the years to when he began his agency and takes note of his first wireless experience. "I cover Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I'd be driving around in the wide-open spaces and the pager would go off. Then the really hard work would begin. I could spend up to an hour traveling around looking, first for a pay phone, and second for a pay phone that worked."

Thankfully those days are now gone as Diamond, like so many of his peers, takes advantage of the ever-present pager, cell phone and wireless laptop computer.

"Wireless communication makes the rep more productive. It also ensures that his communication is immediate and clear," says Diamond. "It's not uncommon while I'm on the road to have a customer call me with a bill of materials and ask for a quote. While I'm still in my car, I can jump on the Internet, access



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Roger Diamond

a manufacturer's extranet, gather the needed information, plug in a multiplier and turn it all around within an hour. And that's all from my car with no need for me to be in the office."

"I'm hardly what I'd call a 'techno-geek,'" reports John King, King Sales Co., Minneapolis, Minnesota. "When I started my business in 1981, I was by myself and I asked myself the question, 'How can I bring the greatest amount of value to my principals and customers?' One of the answers to that question was to automate myself. As a result, I did what so many other people at that time were doing — I bought myself a fax machine to the tune of about \$4,500. Two problems resulted right away — first was the price of the machine and second was the fact that I couldn't find anyone to fax to because no one else had a fax machine. But what the move did accomplish was to cause one of my principals to say, 'You're really on the cutting edge when it comes to investing in your business and proving your worth to manufacturers and customers.'

"That move so many years ago just fueled my desire to stay in the lead when it comes to communication."

The fax machine jumpstarted King's interest in things high-tech and he's followed suit over the years, now standing at a point where his entire operation is wireless.

About eight years ago King got laptops for everyone in his agency. "Basically about all we could do then that was really beneficial was to dial-up from the field. We had the server loaded with GoldMine located at our office in Minneapolis which our people out in the field could sync with. That allowed them to keep their files up to date and create sales reports that we'd forward to our principals. After a while, however, we found that our syncing efforts weren't always reliable. We decided to buy a larger server and bought Microsoft SalesOutlook, a web-based marketing program. This allowed our salesmen in the field to simply push a button and update files via e-mail."

Constant Contact

"The impetus for providing this for our sales staff was that I wanted them to feel that they had every tool at their disposal and they can use them any place at any time. They can be at the gate of an airport or in their hotel rooms late at night and they'd have everything they need to get the job done."



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While King is an advocate of salespeople having ready access to their wireless laptops, he's not quite so hot on using laptops for sales calls and presentations. "I'm not so sure that customers really care for that. The laptop can be a little intrusive and intimidating. Something like a BlackBerry (one of the new leaders in handheld personal organizers that also has the ability to serve as a phone and grant access to e-mail), however, never interrupts the flow of a sales call and the salesman can get a great deal of work done with them (e.g., checking on deliveries, responding to e-mail)."

In general, King remains positive on the wireless experience and he cites affordability and productivity as chief benefits. "The rep today is under a lot of scrutiny from principals and customers. He has to do everything he can to show his willingness to invest in his business and to improve his productivity. Wireless connectivity should hardly be viewed as an agency expense; rather, it is an investment in the present and the future. If there's anything I can communicate to other reps — especially the one- to three-man agencies — it's that you have to use every method you can to improve your productivity. It's hard to keep up on new products, product lines and keep customers interested in you, and it's tough to retain good principals, unless you can show you're conducting business wisely. Wireless communication and the tools that accompany it are among the most effective devices you can employ."

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One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283 • Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776 • Fax: (949) 855-2973
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