




Modern thinking 

walk talk and surf

by Steve Nichols

ONCE UPON A TIME, THE ONLY WAY TO SEND A MESSAGE FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER WAS WITH SMOKE SIGNALS. WITH NO WIND AND A GOOD FIRE, YOU COULD PROBABLY GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS IN A FEW MINUTES, BUT YOU WERE ALSO A BIT RESTRICTED IN WHAT YOU COULD SAY.

In the 21st century you have a cornucopia of communications tools to choose from. You can talk, text, e-mail or instant message your thoughts via a phone, computer, laptop, CD, DVD, Portable Digital Assistant (PDA) or website. And the language we use has changed too.

We are on the very edge of the next leap in communications technology. Within just a few years we will have more ways to communicate than ever before. Chances are that we won't recognise our current telephone or laptop computer, or even our language.

We are already seeing the fledgling signs of technology convergence with mobile phones that double up as diaries and digital cameras. An engineer can now photograph damage to a car and have it e-mailed back

to his office in minutes. You can also now buy PDAs that double as mobile phones, allowing you to talk to or even see someone and check your diary at the same time.

One vision

But soon we will have a single device that will do everything - act as a hand-held phone, camera, TV, diary, calculator, address book and much more. Throw in 24/7 wireless e-mail and web browsing, wherever you are on the planet, and you get something that becomes a real business tool.

Jim Sadler, NUI's head of innovation and architecture for business.solutions, looks at technology research and development and admits that the company has not really exploited some of our existing technology. »



"There are a number of challenges. The speed of development of mobile-based devices is so fast that by the time we could develop services they would be out of date," he said.

Jim points to a succession of technologies, such as SMS and WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) to show what he means. "WAP was supposed to be a ground breaker, but in reality it was very

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restrictive in terms of the amount of data that could be passed around."

WAP was really an interim technology until the third generation of mobile phones came along. Now, WAP is being superseded by so-called GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) internet access that allows anyone with a suitable handheld computer or phone to surf the net at modem-like speeds.

Food for thought

The Blackberry, for instance, is a PDA that is small enough to fit in your pocket but can send and receive e-mail wherever you are on five continents. You don't even need to dial-up to receive your e-mail - they get delivered to your pocket via an 'always-on' net connection.

The Blackberry will also handle rudimentary web browsing, works perfectly as a mobile phone, will send and receive SMS messages and also has an address book, calculator, diary and games built-in.

The downside is the relatively slow connection speeds, but wi-fi is changing all that. Wi-fi is wireless broadband with speeds

up to ten times faster than a modem connection, to anyone equipped with a wi-fi enabled computer. Just by fitting a wireless broadband card to a laptop you can currently access the web from any area equipped with wi-fi. Imagine a world where you could get free wi-fi access all over town - airports, railway stations, pubs, libraries and restaurants.

Pie in the sky? Not really - this view of a wireless internet world Utopia is just around the corner.

Jim pointed out that Norwich Union already has well-established web-based systems, like www.norwichunion.com. As more and more devices converge on an 'IT-friendly' platform, it means that there is little to be gained in developing access to our web pages through technologies such as WAP when most people will probably choose full internet access through a mobile device.

In the meantime, NUI is looking at how it can use existing technologies to communicate better.

The texting trend

"We are currently using SMS as a means of marketing to our customers. We do have to be careful though as it could be seen as invasive, like e-mail spam. If you end up alienating your customer you end up worse off than when you started," Jim said.

NUI is also looking at other uses for SMS. It is currently trialling the ability to have

your day's mainframe diary appointments sent to a mobile phone via SMS. Other initiatives being looked at include the possibility of populating your phone's address book with work telephone numbers via SMS.

But Jim sees a limited future for SMS. "As hand-held internet devices get rolled out SMS will start to look very old fashioned," he said.

While SMS is cool the internet is the way to go - witnessed by the use of VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) now being used in NUI's call centres in India. Instead of having separate data and phone lines you can now feed everything down one fibre optic cable.

"This brings big advantages, you can handle e-mail, voice and text all from one desktop. A call centre operator can talk to a customer and then switch to the internet to show them documents. They can then switch to web-text and answer any other questions via their keyboard. It is even possible to handle, say, six callers at once by having a different window open for each 'conversation'," said Jim. "VOIP will let us start to think very differently about how we deal with customers. In future we will be able to see our customers too, via video links using web cams or handheld phones."

Norwich Union is already using 'web chat' on its website - enabling users to 'talk' via their keyboard and get help when needed.

But the biggest problems ahead lie not with the technology, but with our own society and the way we perceive computing.

Tomorrow's world

Tomorrow's generation will see computing as an enabler. They will be so used to e-mail, texting and using the internet to buy what they need that the idea of using a telephone to buy insurance will be completely foreign to them.

"When they join Norwich Union they may be perplexed as to why we don't send each other SMS messages. They may also be confused as to why we have meetings when a chat room or Instant Messaging (IM) could accomplish the same net result.

The world is changing and we may have to change the way we communicate too," Jim concluded.

Some commentators have already criticised texting for degrading the English language. Teachers in Scotland have even called for it to be banned completely after some exam papers were riddled with texting abbreviations.

And if you think that is over the top consider the following statistics from a recent survey. According to research for msn.co.uk, we are developing a whole new language,

which has been born out of online communications. People using new technologies to communicate are much more likely to start the conversation "hey" and sign it off "laters" than the more formal alternatives, says the study.

Jonathon Green, a lexicographer and author of a dictionary of slang, said: "It wouldn't surprise me if, in 50 years, there was no longer a need for 'hello' and 'goodbye' in general or certainly in electronic communication." ●

Talking the right language

- A text messaging scheme which offers teenagers health advice and information via their mobile has provided around 100 young people with advice on issues ranging from sexual health, relationships, coping with puberty and concerns about body image. Many calls came from boys who usually find it embarrassing or difficult to access information about health issues, which can cause enormous distress and anxiety.
- Getting a quickie divorce took on a whole new meaning in Malaysia after it was decided that a man can now divorce his wife with a text message. Under Islamic law men are allowed to divorce their

wives simply by saying - or texting - the word 'talaq' - I divorce you - three times.

- 3,500 new words and phrases were added to the Oxford English dictionary in September 2002. These included; Jedi, Klingon, Blairism, asylum seeker, name and shame, chick flick and shedload.
- By 2004, you should be able to receive electronic alerts for court appearances, flood warnings, driving tests and hospital appointments if a Government e-initiative goes ahead.
- A schoolgirl in Scotland was criticised for submitting the following essay to her

teacher: "My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :- kids FTf. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc." (In translation: "My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place.")

- Text messages have superseded phone calls as the most common use for a mobile phone among young people, a new survey reveals. More than eight out of ten people under the age of 25 are more likely to send someone a text message than call.