We spent RM1.2b on SMS

It's now the ultimate in digital lifestyle

By Deborah Loh
'Dapat' information via SMS

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. — The public will soon be able to send text messages via their handphones to government departments and agencies to obtain information.

The "Dapat" SMS service will be launched by Defence Minister Datin Sri Najib Tun Razak on Monday. The information will be sent to the consumer within seconds by an automated data system which manages a department's SMS server.

Dapat, owned by Interactive Vista (M) Sdn Bhd, is a home-grown technology and probably one of the kind in the world.

Interactive Vista executive vice-president Azli Faat said consumers not only have the luxury of information on demand but are also spared the long-drawn process of obtaining information from government departments.

"For example, to get a form from the Employees Provident Fund, all a person needs to do is type EPF followed by the name of the form and his e-mail address and send it to 22728 (Dapat)."

"Dapat will retrieve the document from the EPF's information server and send it to his e-mail," Azli said.

Azli said the company is using Dapat to make SMS a formally accepted way of communication for businesses and government departments.

Interactive Vista, which started marketing the service about two months ago, has about 40 organisations and companies registered with it, including the police, Home Ministry, EPF, Tenaga Nasional and Peugeot.

Azli said the company expected to get about 6,000 companies, departments and organisations by the end of the year.

Dapat also provides Multimedia Message Services, whereby users are able to send photos of accidents, for instance, to the police or the insurance company.

Azli said a market test showed the public was receptive to the service.

Companies can also use Dapat to survey the market, receive orders and broadcast advertising messages to targeted customers.
SMS a quick and discreet way of passing information

much faster than cellular service usage at 20 percent.

The growth of text messaging is phenomenal that it has been less than three years since cellular operators rolled out the inter-operator SMS in October, 2001.

SMS appeals because it is a quick and discreet way of passing information. Messages can be sent to many people simultaneously. Recipients can choose to answer at leisure, or not at all.

Lately, SMS usage broke new ground in the Government, which used it in its public delivery system.

Youths used SMS to check if they had been called up for National Service. Motorists use it to check with the Road Transport Department if they had been summoned for traffic offences.

The RTD also uses it, through the general packet radio service (GPRS), to do background checks on individual motorists and vehicles.

Other SMS usages are just as compelling: sending feedback on taxi drivers to the Commercial Vehicles Licensing Board or checking the delivery status of registered and express mail through the “SMS-POS” service operated by Pos Malaysia Berhad. Citizens can also check their voter registration status with the Election Commission via SMS.

SMS has even enhanced political culture: one service provider allows subscribers to check their party membership status, obtain news flashes on the latest party happenings, or download ring tones of the party’s song and logo.

Energy, Communication and Multimedia Communications Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie said using SMS in the public delivery system is part of the Government’s effort to encourage the use of information communications technology.

“We are very much encouraged by developments taking place,” he said in an e-mail interview.

“This is part and parcel of our move towards E-Government and towards incorporating the use of ICT in government processes and, more importantly, dealing with and serving the public.”

“SMS and the e-mail have become the norm for internal communication in the civil service,” he said. “There will be more Government agencies offering information services via SMS.”

The growing number of mobile phone users is also a factor in the increased use of SMS. There were 10 million mobile phone subscribers last year, at a penetration rate of 42.4 per cent of the population. In 2002, 36.9 per cent used mobile phones and in 2001, 30.8 per cent.

With the advent of multimedia messaging service (MMS), will the mobile phone change the way the public deals with the Government? Will Malaysians one day apply for passports by sending photo and thumbprint through MMS?

Moggie did not commit himself but he said: “There is already tremendous development and popularity in SMS and picture messaging. Going by the trend, especially in Japan and Korea, the future of MMS looks promising.”

Moggie said Malaysia was beginning to roll out new generation technologies which, once in place, would enable the migration from SMS to MMS.

It was also reported last August that cellular operators have begun talks on sending MMS across rival networks.

Equally important are the necessary legal frameworks and mechanisms to govern electronic transactions.

One is the Digital Signature Act 1997, which came into effect the following year. It ensures that personal information sent over communication networks is kept secure and confidential by recognising digital certificates.

“This will further facilitate and enhance the potential of MMS,” Moggie said, “to become a conduit for the Government to deliver its services.”
"Dapat" access to a host of services

BY NICK LEONG

PETALING JAYA: Handphone users will now have access to a variety of information and services provided by government departments and corporations via a single Short Messaging Service (SMS) or Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) number.

By keying in 2728 or the word 'Dapat' on their handphones, users can check the amount they can withdraw from the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) or be alerted to any crime in their area.

They can also book air tickets from Malaysia Airlines, reserve a seat at the Sepang International Circuit or get advice from nutritionists about certain products.

Deputy Prime Minister Datin Seri Najib Tun Razak said the services provided by 'Dapat' could enhance the quality of life easier to use than the internet.

"For corporations, 'Dapat' automated response facility saves the need to invest in and maintain costly infrastructure and manpower," he said.

Najib said 33 government departments and corporations had enlisted with 'Dapat'.

He said government departments included EPF, the Kuala Lumpur, Kedah and Perlak police, Fire and Rescue Department, Home Ministry, Human Resources Ministry and Anti-Corruption Agency.

He said some of the companies and organisations enlisted with 'Dapat' were Genting Bhd, MAS, Peugeot and Prime Group of Colleges.

"Among the organisations providing community services enlisted with 'Dapat' are the National Kidney Foundation, Community Support Network, Pusat Persatuan Kanak-kanak for the Physically Disabled."
PETERI UMMNO SETS UP SMS HOTLINE FOR ABUSE VICTIMS

PETALING JAYA: Victims of incest and domestic violence who are afraid to come forward can now seek counselling and help through a short messaging service (SMS) hotline set up by Puteri Umno's public complaints bureau.

Bureau chairman Rohaina Abdul Latiff said the service provided another avenue for the victims to report abuse and seek assistance.

"Incest victims, especially children or teenagers, may have difficulty in expressing themselves when they face such situations. They may feel embarrassed or ashamed to speak up or fear being punished."

"Through the SMS, there is no need for them to face strangers or anyone else when they reveal their problems," she said in an interview yesterday.

Rohaina said the service, which had been in operation since April, had been receiving a good response with 15 to 16 messages a day.

"Not all the messages received were from incest or domestic violence victims as we also received messages from youth who needed other types of advice," she added.

She said it was not easy to coax victims to reveal the identity of the perpetrators but the counsellors were trained to be persistent.

"We have to treat them like friends and avoid applying pressure on them. We do not question them like the authorities do but instead provide a listening ear."

"This way, they are encouraged to come out of their shell," she said.

She said the victims usually took a few days before they revealed their identity and agreed to lodge a police report if the case was severe.

She added that the counsellors were trained to screen messages or calls to prevent pranksters from abusing the service.

Rohaina said at times the mothers of the victims also contacted the bureau through SMS for guidance or legal advice.

"The bureau also gives counselling to these victims to help them lead a normal life after facing the disturbing experience," she said, adding that education was necessary as the victims might perceive incest or other heinous crimes as normal practices.

She said the service would be officially launched on Friday in Kuala Lumpur Plaza, adding that several counters would be open to provide medical and legal advice.

For further information, contact the bureau at 03-4023 9394 or use the SMS service at 019-634 9941.
Microsoft braces for MyDoom onslaught

Features > Defending cyberspace: An agenda for action 17
Corporate IT > Cheaper IDD rates for cellphone users 21

Captain Cyborg II
As a cyborg, eccentric professor tailors reality

BY BRIAN BERGSTEIN

WHEN you first meet Steve Mann, it seems as if you've interrupted him, interrupting diamonds into doing some sort of specialized welding. Because the first thing you notice is the plastic frame that comes around his right eye and holds a lens over his right eye.

But quickly you see that there's more to his contraception. A tiny video camera is affixed to the plastic frame. Multicoloured wires wrap around his head. Red and white lights blink under his sweater.

Mann greets you, warmly at first, though he soon gets distracted by something on the tiny computer monitor wedged over his eye.

In fact, being with Mann sometimes feels like the ultimate in-your-face version of having a dinner companion who talks on a cell phone. But don't be put off by it. Someone you, too, might be a cyborg.

More than human

Mann, a 41-year-old engineering professor at the University of Toronto, spends hours every day walking around with this little monitor in front of his eye - so that he can see nothing but what he is wearing, and what he can sense not with his eyes, but with his other senses.

While the small video camera gives him a recordable, real-time view of what's in front of him, the tiny screen is filled with messages, advertising, computer code, and more. A tiny microphone attached to the eyepiece makes its way to his ear, and the speaker on the small computer allows him to talk into the computer.

Mann manipulates the computer through a handheld key device he invented, though he has experimented with putting electrodes on his skin and trying to control the cursor with brain waves.

It sounds like a lot, and it is. But Mann became a cyborg so he could be more human.

To be sure, the word "cyborg" is a popular way to describe a person who is a combination of man and machine. It is used to describe people who have implants in their bodies, such as pacemakers or cochlear implants.

But Mann has sensitive and perspective motives for his electronic implants, which began 25 years ago. He believes that seeing computers and cameras will give people more power to maintain their privacy and individuality.

Levelling the "power dynamic"

For one thing, Mann says that the power of wearable computers to filter out advertising and other elements of daily experience he finds objectionable.

And in a world of over-abundant surveillance cameras for security, and smart database mining software for government intelligence and corporate marketing, Mann believes regular people ought to have cameras and powerful computers on them, too.

It's all about levelling the power dynamic.

"People feel they're masters of their own destiny when everything they need is right there with them," he says.

A cyborg could, say, take pictures of hostile police officers during a political demonstration and instantly post them on the Web - to spur others to join in the protest, perhaps, or to simply provide alternative documentation of the scene.

Mann calls such positions "good," adding, "I can't say I'm opposed to weblogs.""In more everyday language." Mann advocates "using a lot of the machine against itself."

For example, Mann has created a performance art piece that allows people to make images of their surroundings as if they were wearing an eyepiece, and to see the world through the eyepiece. He has also created an Eyeglo system that allows people to see images of their surroundings as if they were wearing an eyepiece, and to see the world through the eyepiece.

Mann believes everyone should fight The System, those powerful institutions lurking behind the one-way mirrors. "Clerks should be confronted with their clickless." Mann says that one afternoon in the December Gallery, an electronic-art studio in the Toronto's Chinatown. Mann was being used to something, and pedantic about it.

Cyberman, a 2001 Canadian documentary about his work, includes footage of Mann's talk on wearab"les. In one scene, they use their wares to create a conversation that is simultaneously filmed through the eyepiece.

"Yet Mann's cyber experience is much more than a political statement or piece of showbusiness."

In his 2001 book Cyborg, Digital Destiny and Human Possibility in the Age of the Wearable Computer, Mann wrote about the surreal beauty he experienced in programming the computer in his hair, and the colours, or alert him to objects behind him.

"The wearable computer allows me to explore my environment, altering my consciousness with any perspectives so I can choose - again, every time - to see the world in very different, quite liberating ways," he wrote in Cyborg. For example, Mann said his graduate students have developed software that can transform billboards or other rectangular shapes in the physical world - viewed through the lenses of a wearable computer - into virtual boxes for reading e-mail and other messages.

Mann envisions future generations walking down the street and seeing virtual, personalized messages on the stops and in the windows. A free texting system - one with a quick e-mailing that only you would see - on the street - "just around - you went two blocks too far."

Guinea pig geeks

Of course, there are more practical possibilities. Mann's graduate student James Fung once was wearing an Eyepiece while sitting around a campfire with fellow students. They used a wireless Internet connection to find the world's most interesting websites. "It was nice example of myself and the computer working together," he says. "I could imagine that if it were completely concealed in glasses, people would naturally think that I was able to recall the sources myself." Mann builds his "wearables" and "Eyepieces" himself, with input from his wife, Betty, who has been a local computer guru for nearly 35 years.

Mann has tinkered with this device for over two years. His first wearable site had to be carried in a heavy backpack. He has also had to wear a special looking that features a large tshirt with calf-tie CMOS 4 arrays.

Eventually Mann developed a system that could be hidden behind sunglasses, and now uses the no-side-of-the-face Wraparound. A computer can plug into a variety of computers and devices. One of his computer images features a computer with a familiar 4 processor, at least 512 megabytes of memory and a specialized operating system based on Linux.

Drawing on where he's going, Mann carries a few different wireless transmitters so he can connect.
A cyborg future is inevitable

Steve Mann is not alone in dreaming of enhancing human capabilities with computer intelligence. Some futurists consider it inevitable. Inventor Ray Kurzweil predicts a human-computer mind meld this century that will usher "The Age of Spiritual Machines."

Gazing into that same ethereal future, professor Kevin Warwick of Britain's University of Reading had circuitry implanted inside his arm for three months last year.

In one aspect of the experiment, Warwick moved his hand, and the implant relayed signals through the Internet to move a robotic arm.

The gestures weren't coordinated, but Warwick said the test showed the feasibility of plugging electronic devices into the nervous system. Now he hopes to lay the groundwork for a brain implant that could aid people with disabilities or augment existing abilities.

Mann believes a cyborg future is inevitable. Eventually, he says, everyone will want to be more tightly linked with computers, to enhance our memory and connections to other people.

And in that case, Mann contends that wearing the machine will be optimal. "My computer's twisted up like a pretzel around me, instead of me all hunched over a box," he says with pride.

Mann realises that for mass appeal, wearable computing will have to be small — perhaps incorporated into contact lenses.

That will take a big manufacturer, and indeed, Mann has advised Cybernaut Corp, a Virginia-based company that makes wearable computers — including one that fits over one eye — for field technicians, the military and the disabled.

But that incarnation of wearable computing, says Mann, is too specialised, too limited.

"What's needed is the equivalent of the personal computer, which was designed for no purpose in particular, and so it started a revolution," he says.

But professor, could there really ever be widespread demand for your kind of device? Getting cues from a tiny machine or communicating through it is one thing, but when do you think John Q. Public would let a computer "mediate reality"?

Mann lets that question wash over him.

"Any prediction can turn out to be a combination of codswallop, kerfuffle and flappodoodle," he says while wearing the EyeTap at a Toronto pizza joint. "A lot of people try to predict the future, and I guess one question is, why should I listen to them?" — AP

For InTech's interview with Kevin Warwick, go to star-techcentral.com/search/archives.asp and type in "leading humanity forward" as your keyword phrase.