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## INSIDE TECHNOLOGY

# Conversion of computer into cell phone advances

By Jon Van

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Although not always obvious, converting your computer into a cell phone has its advantages.

Think about composing and sending short messages, especially messages that include photos or videos. You can do that on a cell phone, but the larger keyboard and a computer screen make it much easier.

Even a phone call might work better using the computer instead of a cell phone if you're in a room where cell phone reception isn't good.

Making cell phone networks compatible with other wired and wireless broadband networks, and enabling customers to use Internet telephone service as well as regular mobile voice, seems a logical step to the geeky types at BridgePort Networks, a Chicago-based software operation that promotes such convergence.

Although software platforms to integrate different networks have been installed by several mobile carriers, actual services have been slow to emerge. There are some handsets that operate both on mobile networks and on Internet protocol, but they are something of a rarity.

That's why BridgePort executives are enthusiastic about their new product, which is a computer memory stick combined with a cell phone SIM card. Plug the stick into your computer and it becomes a functional second cell phone.

Cost of the memory stick is so low that Mike Mulica, BridgePort's chief executive, expects that cell phone carriers will subsidize them, maybe to the point of giving them free to customers.

"We think we've given carriers a response to Skype [the popular voice over Internet protocol service]," he said.

In studies using University of Illinois students in Urbana, the new service proved popular, said Sanjay Jhavar, a company senior vice president.

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"Typically, students have cell phones that are part of family plans paid for by their parents," he said. "They have limited voice minutes each month, and when they get near the limit, they shift to text messaging."

Students welcomed the ease of messaging from computers, he said. BridgePort believes that mobile carriers will offer memory-stick services at low monthly flat rates because a boost to network traffic likely would result.

Memory sticks let customers use data services while maintaining the network authentication that mobile carriers value, said Mulica.

"We see MobileStick as overcoming the barriers that have prevented convergence until now," Mulica said.

**COUPONS BY PHONE:** A local entrepreneur has started Text2store Mobile Corp., a service that provides discount coupons to cell phone customers.

This is a form of opt-in cell phone advertising that is initiated by the cell phone customer, who must go to [www.text2store.com](http://www.text2store.com) to sign up for the service.

"You give us your e-mail and your cell phone number," said Ola Ayeni, the firm's founder. "We send you a confirmation code that you put into the system."

"The customer has complete control. We don't send more than two coupons a day, and the customer can go online to stop the service at any time."

Customers can indicate with a ZIP code where they are interested in doing business and can suggest what kind of restaurants, shops and merchandise interests them, Ayeni said.

Once a customer receives a coupon on his cell phone, he can get the discount by either showing the cell phone screen to the merchant or providing the discount code that is part of the coupon, Ayeni said.

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[jvan@tribune.com](mailto:jvan@tribune.com)

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