

Using Speech

Doing It All

By Robin Springer

A key grip in the entertainment industry, a general contractor, licensed electrician and a martial arts instructor, Billy communicates with people all day long.

Hard of hearing since childhood, Billy learned to read lips out of necessity (he liked to sit in the back of the classroom, but was unable to hear his teachers). In his mid 30's, when his hearing went "completely bad" and he found that volume boosters and amps did not work for him any more, Billy enrolled in sign language classes.

Nearly nine years ago Billy was introduced to WyndTell, manufactured by Wynd Communications, a GoAmerica Company. Designed for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, the product provides two-way wireless service, enabling users to communicate wirelessly via email, TTY, fax, chat, one-touch relay or TTS message delivery using the Antares TTS engine. The device, completely portable, is Billy's main tool to communicate. It is on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When he goes to sleep he puts it on his pillow so he can feel the vibration that alerts him when there is a message. He can make, schedule and confirm appointments using this device.

It would not be possible for Billy to do all of his jobs without this communication tool. "I don't need the pager to do the work," he says. "I need it to be notified of the work." Once on the job he reads lips and uses sign language to communicate with clients and colleagues.

WyndTell, while making a work environment possible for someone who is hearing impaired or deaf, makes work more productive for individuals who do hear. With plans starting at \$14.95 a month, the product is a viable option for people with and without disabilities.

One day while at my office I sent an email to Billy. Almost immediately, I received an email back from him in which he stated he was in front of my house at that moment. On another occasion I called the relay service, asking Billy if it was okay if we modified our plans. Within minutes, my phone rang. Upon answering the call I was greeted with a speech-generated message stating the change was fine.

Wynd says its product "enables...private communication." It minimizes the need for third-party involvement in the transmission of the message, but the issue of message interception exists.

The product uses radio waves, described as "packet radio". The message, broken into packets, is dispersed across the network in a series of non-linear packets, which, upon reaching its destination, are reassembled in the form of a complete message. This, a company representative says, makes it difficult or impossible for a hacker to intercept. However, they liken it to intercepting cell phone conversations, which occurs regularly.

Stating their network is secure and cannot be infiltrated, Wynd says that the only time a

security risk is present is when the message leaves the WyndTell network. For example, if a subscriber sends an email message the security of the email is directly related to the security measures in place by the ISP of the recipient.

When a subscriber sends a message, it goes to the nearest WyndTell wireless tower and is subsequently sent by a traditional computer to the Wynd gateway. At this point, the type of message being transmitted is determined (relay, email, fax, chat, TTS) before it is sent to the recipient via the appropriate channel.

The service is available in the United States and Canada. However, because no global standard exists, it does not allow users to roam across borders. This "Technological Darwinism" can be likened to the competition experienced between VHS and Beta video recorders in the 1970's and '80s. Eventually the Betamax was phased out and VHS became the industry standard.

Wynd Communications allows hearing impaired individuals to more efficiently communicate. Or as Billy says, "I have TC-Total Communication."



Robin E. Springer is president of Computer Talk, a consulting firm specializing in the design and implementation of speech recognition and other hands-free technology services. She can be reached at (888) 999-9161 or by e-mail at info@comptalk.com.