

washingtonpost.com

Connecting . . .

As people do more with cellphones, start-ups seek to build social networks just for those little screens.

By Kim Hart

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, March 11, 2008; D01

Wandering through a foreign airport or strolling down Sixth Avenue to his [Manhattan](#) office, Devaraj Southworth is usually staring at his [BlackBerry](#), rapidly tapping out text messages, checking profiles and making international calls.

The 35-year-old Internet marketing executive's eyes are bolted to the phone because of Mig33, a made-for-mobile social network. He logs on several times a day to keep tabs on his friends and invite others to join them. His circle of cronies, he said, "seems to grow by the week."

Mig33 is one of a growing number of social networks designed to be used primarily on wireless devices. Following the success of online communities such as [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#), start-ups like MocoSpace and Groovr are hoping to attract people who now rely on cellphones more than laptops to stay connected with friends.

Larger online social networks have maintained mobile versions of their Web sites for some time and continue to roll out features. Facebook and MySpace both launched scaled-down versions of their sites in 2006 and have since introduced applications tailored specifically for the small screens of mobile phones. Last month, MySpace redesigned its mobile site to let users invite friends, upload photos or change their mood status, directly from their mobile phone. [LinkedIn](#) last month launched its first free mobile application and also plans to sell premium subscriptions to the service.

Brandon Lucas, who directs MySpace's mobile initiatives, said he expects about half of the social network's traffic to come from mobile devices over the next few years.

But to date, launching mobile services in the United States has been a much tougher business than it has been in [Asia](#) and [Europe](#), where cellphones are many consumers' primary way of accessing the Internet. U.S. consumers have been slower to adopt Internet applications on their cellphones; only 3.9 percent of U.S. mobile subscribers report logging on to a mobile social networking site

Advertisement



Putting people first.

FedEx®

FORTUNE
100 BEST
COMPANIES
TO WORK FOR 2008

Find out more ►

or blog, according to M:Metrics, a research firm that tracks mobile trends.

One reason such services are adopted more slowly in the United States is that carriers maintain tighter control over what consumers can do with their phones; another is that Web-enabled cellphones have not been as prevalent as laptops and other personal computers.

Still, the founders of Mig33 see potential in the United States. There are more than 250 million U.S. cellphone subscribers, according to an estimate by CTIA, a wireless industry group.

"We've seen MySpace and Facebook going mobile, and we wanted to have a service that was unique because it's strictly for mobile phones," said Mei Lin Ng, a co-founder of Mig33, which recently received \$13.5 million in its second round of venture-capital funding.

Mig33 members can chat, check e-mail and share photos for free, as well as send text messages and make Internet-based phone calls for a small fee -- and at a significant discount on standard carrier prices. In many countries, Mig33 sells prepaid calling cards for the transactions. It will soon start selling a few virtual gifts and introduce a "buzz" feature that will alert members when their friends pop onto the network.

The network also allows members access to popular instant messaging programs run by [Microsoft](#), [Yahoo](#), [AOL](#) and [Google](#), as well as to private chat rooms. "We noticed people were addicted to text messages, and we wanted to build a platform that would allow people to text and chat more cheaply," Ng said.

But with so many social networks catering to a host of interests and demographics, new services face the potential for consumer fatigue, some say.

Seamus McAteer, an analyst with M:Metrics, said the audience for mobile versions of MySpace and Facebook is growing. But he said, "How many social networks do people really want to belong to, and do they really want another one on their mobile phone?"

The answer, at least for Mig33, is that it offers cheap long-distance calling over the Web in addition to common social-networking features like messaging and photo sharing. By inviting more friends to join the network, Mig33 members can earn credits that they can use to send text messages.

While the firm's name sounds like it has military undertones, Ng said Mig33 simply caught on with users when the service launched in 2005. After gaining a following of about 10 million users overseas -- many of whom are in Asia and [South Africa](#) -- the company moved its headquarters from [Australia](#) to [San Francisco](#) six months ago to tackle the U.S. market. Mig33 counts about 100,000 U.S. users, compared with the millions of mobile MySpace and Facebook memberships.

Made-for-mobile communities like Mig33 may have more revenue opportunities than those that started on the Web, said Christine Perey, who recently wrote a report on social networking for Informa, a market research firm in [London](#). Charging for subscriptions, generating data traffic, and selling things like virtual gifts and video clips have, in some cases, made money for the wireless social networks.

"If it's online, people assume it's going to be free and supported by advertising," she said. By contrast, "people are willing to pay for their mobility and extra features."

But Mig33 isn't the only start-up with that in mind. MocoSpace, based in [Boston](#), lets its 2 million users share photos and videos, chat, and blog from their mobile phones and has received \$3 million in funding. In September, Google bought some assets of Zingku, a mobile social network used to exchange invitations, mobile fliers and photos. Groovr, a one-year-old company based in [Los Angeles](#), offers live chats and instant updates about local happenings. Itsmy.com, a two-year-old start-up based in [Germany](#), has built a community

by offering free, ad-supported mobile content to members.

Some Mig33 members said it's tough to meet new people on the network, partly because there are so few U.S. users.

Eric Hernandez, 31, of [Orlando](#), said he uses Mig33 to text and call friends in [the Netherlands](#) and [Africa](#) because it's cheaper than his phone service. But chat-room conversations often turn racy or otherwise inappropriate, so it hasn't opened the door to new friendships, he said.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Verizon Official Site](#)

Exclusive Deals & Free Phone Offers at Verizon Wireless - Official Site
www.VerizonWireless.com

[A BlackBerry For Everyone](#)

Small, Portable, Sleek. There Is A BlackBerry® For Everyone.
www.BlackBerry.com/YourChoice

[Mobile Social Media](#)

Mobile Communities Unconference March 20th in Palo Alto
Mcu2008.EventBrite.com