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Slow, Reliable Data

At the recent Cingular WAVE 2003 conference in Las Vegas, both the chief operating officer and the chief technology officer stated that Cingular Interactive's Mobitex network is far from dead. In fact, Cingular will add to the network in certain areas of the U.S.

For those who are not familiar with the Mobitex network, a short history is in order. The system operates in the 900-MHz band and was developed by Ericsson many years ago. First built in the U.S. by RAM Mobile Data, BellSouth later acquired 49% of the network and then bought the entire thing. Cingular was formed to be BellSouth's Mobitex network company.

The Mobitex network had a peak data rate of 8 Kbps and was designed from the ground up to cover inside buildings where service techs and other mobile employees work. It is one of two networks of this type in the U.S. and it has been in operation since the early 1970s.

During this time the Mobitex network has been used for one of the first wireless email transports by a company called Radio Mail. It was the network used by RIM to launch its first two-way paging device and then its BlackBerry service. At one point, the computer industry was looking long and hard at this network and the network now owned and operated by Motient for use with laptops and even PDAs. However, the folks at AT&T Wireless were able to knock these networks all but out of contention with a technology called CDPD or Cellular Digital Packet Data, a faster data network that shared the cellular infrastructure and was to be nationwide and ubiquitous.

Even though AT&T and others could not deliver CDPD until years after they began hyping it, computer vendors rolled over and waited for CDPD based on promises. Meanwhile, Cingular Interactive and Motient, as they are now known, were providing pretty good coverage in many areas. Both of these networks measure their coverage as a percentage of the business population in the U.S. and both claim about 92% coverage today.

Neither network is particularly exciting nor do they have data speeds sufficient to provide customers with the ability to surf the Web in a timely fashion. But both of these networks deliver mission-critical information to hundreds of thousands of users every day. With a speed of 8K or 19.2K on the Motient network, you aren't going to download a 5-MB PowerPoint file, but you are going to get your email and other text information in near-real time to your BlackBerry or Good Technology G100 device. You will be up-to-date and you will have coverage in buildings in many urban areas.

I have worn a BlackBerry on my belt since Alpha test days many years ago when I became hooked on it and the freedom it provides me, so I can tell you from personal experience that the Cingular Interactive network provides coverage far better than CDPD ever was and better than any GPRS network today. It was designed from the ground up for "push" type data communications. Devices on the Cingular and Motient networks have a static address and can be easily "found." There is no "roaming" and because the devices are always on and listening to the network, users get the impression that coverage is far better than it really is. Why is this?

If you carry a BlackBerry type of device on one of these networks and your email is "pushed" out to you as it arrives, you can go in and out of coverage all day long without being aware of it. When you are in coverage your device registers in seconds and you get your email so you never really know when you are out of coverage. As an example, I drive from San Jose to Southern California once a month or more. On the drive down Highway 101 I am in Verizon coverage in all but three spots, but I am in Cingular Interactives coverage only three times for a few minutes each. Yet when I get to Southern California my BlackBerry is up to date because as I drove through each coverage area I received my email. I know where these spots are but if

I was an average BlackBerry user I would not.

The folks at Cingular Wireless have said that they will keep this network around for a long time, which is great for those who want and need economical, text-based data services. In addition to the BlackBerry-type service, these networks are used by delivery folks, police departments and other governmental employees, service technicians and others who have had a need to stay in touch since before voice networks became data-capable.

The folks at Cingular believe that at some point its Cingular Interactive customers will decide to upgrade to the GPRS network and have put into play several plans to help these customers when the time is right. In the meantime, they have pledged to keep the Mobitex network around and not pull the data rug out from under their existing customers as AT&T Wireless is doing.

CDPD uses Cellular AMPS channels that are needed for the carriers while the Cingular and Motient networks use channels that are not part of the cellular band. This means that CDPD would have to sacrifice some of its cellular spectrum for upgrades but Cingular Interactive and Motient do not, and the number of customers on these networks is still growing.

If you are a BlackBerry user on a GSM/GPRS voice-and-data network and would like to find out how much better the Cingular Interactive and Motient networks are at delivering your email and other content, exchange your GPRS BlackBerry for one on either of these slow-speed data-only networks and give it a try. Some of the current growth of these networks is because folks who have tried the "other BlackBerry" have discovered from co-workers how much better the service is on Cingular and Motient and have switched.

As a long-time BlackBerry user I am pleased that the Cingular Interactive network will be around for a long time. There is a lot of life left in the network and while I will experiment with BlackBerrys and other devices on all of the other networks, I think that it will be years before I trust my email, which has become mission critical to me, to a voice-and-data network provider. Thanks Cingular!

[Andrew Seybold](#)

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