

It's time to put it to work.

Waving Hello, From a Distance

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The Packet8 phone has a five-inch liquid-crystal display so callers can look at each other as they chat. Mr. Martin said he did not have to look any farther than his own home to observe the warmth that screen-to-screen communication can create. He also said he had ample in-house proof that the system was extremely easy to use.

"We're finding that my 4-year-old son knows how to use the videophone," he said. "Even his grandmother knows how to use the videophone, which is impressive. This is not just for early adopters, geeks and techno folks like myself."

Convinced that almost anyone who can use a telephone can use his videophones, Mr. Martin said he planned to set up call centers in the coming weeks, including at hospitals where children can talk to (and see) hired "Santas at the North Pole."

Christopher Swann, 34, an investment analyst from Atlanta, said his 1-year-old son got a kick out of the phones. Mr. Swann's biggest complaint about the Packet8 phones is that they are not compatible with other Web-based videoconferencing systems. "It would be great if everyone in the family had one," he said.

He also noted that costs were not limited to the hardware. He said he spends about \$60 a month for his broadband service, a requirement to use the Packet8 phones, and less than \$40 a month for the phone's service, which includes unlimited videoconferencing and Voice Over Internet Protocol, or VoIP.

"It's little more than a gadget right now," Mr. Swann said of his pair of videophones. Because of the firewall protecting his company's computer system, he cannot use one in his main office as he had intended, he said, "but it is a very cool gadget."

Packet8 phones also do not use the new H.264 video encoding and decoding scheme, which provides high-quality, 30-frames-a-second images with half the bandwidth requirements. In some ways, Mr. Hagerty of Polycom said, the new codec may mean to video what the MP3 compression format has meant to audio.

The Packet8 videophones use the older H.263 compression, Mr. Martin said, but they are likely to be upgraded to the new standard next year. Images using the older compression are more prone to breaking up. Nonetheless, Mr. Swann said, his videophones' images are "better than I expected."

Once equipped, the next step -- as in the early days of the telephone -- is to find those similarly equipped. Jason Katz, founder and chief executive of PalTalk, a site that fosters online video messaging, said innovation and falling telecommunications costs allowed him to offer his basic service free. This lets users who install his software to speak to up to six people at a time (they appear as still images). For \$40 a year, users can broadcast video images as well as see them, for two-way video conversations.

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In the last six years, Mr. Katz said, there have been 30 million downloads of the free PalTalk software. Today, he said, there are some three million users on his system speaking to and seeing friends and family members. Some are even meeting new friends, as is the case with Dennis Ludwig, a "40-something" communications technician in Dayton, Ohio, who has been using the service for four years.

"It's almost like being in a room with someone," said Mr. Ludwig, who routinely juggles six video windows at a time on his computer screen. Friendships he has made on PalTalk are so genuine, he said, that he thinks of many of the people he knows only over the Internet as his extended family.

"My mom had open heart surgery three weeks ago," Mr. Ludwig said. "People in my room from nine different countries are praying for her."

What It Takes

The Virtual Visit Becomes Easier and Saves People the Drive

THE options for home videoconferencing equipment range from the economical to the high end.

Ken Fontaine chose the high end. For the last year and a half, he has been able to look in on a corner of Connecticut where he once ran a family-operated packaging company and where his children and grandchildren now live. He does this from a condominium in Boca Raton, Fla., where he lives in retirement.

When he is in Florida and wants to see his two sons, daughter and five grandchildren, he arranges a virtual visit over an \$8,000 system called CallerVision. (A system is required on each end.)

He picks up what looks like a television remote control, and with a click his family sits before him in stunning clarity and color.

"You don't experience that sense of absence," said Mr. Fontaine, 64. "It is certainly a marked improvement to be able to communicate visually as well as verbally."

Mr. Fontaine's system, whose cameras can be controlled by remote, has been primarily used by corporations, said M. Walter Levine, chairman of High Speed Video (highspeedvideo.us), which makes CallerVision. And yes, he said, the system and its service fee (\$2,200 a month for unlimited use) are expensive. But, he points out, so were the first cellphones.

"The costs will come down," he said, sitting in front of a CallerVision screen and robotic camera in his Manhattan office. Until they do, here are some less expensive systems:

POLYCOM V500 -- \$2,000 for set-top box (polycom.com) that includes video camera and microphone. Plugs into a standard television set and high-speed Internet connection.

POLYCOM PVX -- \$149 software (polycom.com) requires at least a 1.6-gigahertz processor, Windows 2000 or later, a U.S.B. Webcam (with microphone) and a high-speed Internet connection.

PACKET8 VIDEOPHONE -- An Internet-based phone with video screen (with rebate, \$300 for a single unit and \$500 for two) from 8x8 (packet8.net). Requires high-speed Internet access; unlimited video and audio calling in North America is available for \$30 a month.

PALTALK -- A free software download (www.paltalk.com) for multiscreen real-time audio and text messaging with video broadcasting. A \$40 annual fee lets users receive as well as send video images. Michel Marriott

Photos: **LIFELINE** -- Greg Scott is setting up videoconferencing at a church in Eagan, Minn. He hopes families there will be able to see and talk to loved ones stationed in Iraq. (Photo by Allen Brisson-Smith for The New York Times)(pg. G1); **NEW FRIENDS** --



Dennis Ludwig of Ohio uses PalTalk to meet people. He considers some his extended family. (Photo by Mike Simons for The New York Times)(pg. G4)

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