A power-packing pager

It e-mails, it faxes, it telephones, and, oh yeah, the Skytel pager also pages / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

MY NEWEST COMputer weighs just five ounces, hangs from my belt, has a four-line screen, and a six-button keyboard. And I love it.

This is my Wireless Accesslink 2-Way personal communicator. The little device has 128k of RAM and 128k of EEPROM, runs off a AA battery for three weeks, and it can send and receive e-mail over the Internet. Skytel calls the thing a two-way pager. But after using it for a month, it's clear to me that the word "pager" doesn't even begin to explain the power this little box packs.

I had a numeric pager for many years. People would call my private 800-number, type in their own number on a touch-tone phone, and the number they typed would show up on the pager's screen. People thought that I was really wired, but I knew that it was really making me into a slave. Once somebody paged me, I had no choice but to drop everything that I was doing and call them back. Otherwise, they would leave and I would miss the chance to communicate.

But two-way paging isn't like that. For starters, people can send me long, detailed messages. (Well, 250-characters long.) Once I get the message, I can respond directly with the pager itself, either by choosing one of the built-in replies or by picking out my message letter by letter on the little screen.

The other day, I was sitting at a Newbury Street cafe waiting for my wife when suddenly my belt vibrated. "On my way. - Beth R." read the display. "Great. I'm @ Starbucks between D and E," I sent back.

Of course, we could have used a pair of cell phones. But cell phones cost 50 cents a minute in most places, and a dollar a minute when you are roaming. The great thing about Skytel's service is that it costs just $39.95 per month for nationwide service, a price that includes 100 messages. (Additional messages are 25 cents each).

Skytel's system is based on a technology called Reflux, which was developed jointly by Skytel and Motorola over the past decade. The system uses two sets of antennas scattered around Boston and a hundred other metropolitan areas. One set of antennas sends messages to the pager. The second set listens for the replies. This asymmetric system makes batteries last much longer than those of cell phones.

Each two-way pager contains a transmitter and a receiver. Normally both are turned off, saving the unit's battery. Every two minutes or so, the pager turns on its receiver and listens for a message. If it receives a page, it beeps and simultaneously sends an acknowledgment back to Skytel.

If Skytel doesn't get an acknowledgment, the page gets retransmitted again and again. As a result, the two-way system isn't supposed to lose pages as one way systems occasionally do. The pagers also transmit a kind of heart-beat message to Skytel every half hour, telling Skytel where each pager is.

Because Skytel knows where you are, it doesn't have to blanket the entire United States with a message for each of its nationwide customers every time somebody is paged. This simple fact makes a two-way system inherently cheaper to operate than a one-way system.

Although the first two-way pagers were developed by Motorola, Skytel is now supplying its customers with pagers manufactured by Wireless Access.

Besides receiving pages, the little device has an electronic address book, a set of folders for saving away the pages that you have received, an alarm clock, and your choice of notification tones, from simple beeps to Beethoven's 9th Symphony. There's also a computer interface that you can hook the pager up to a Windows or Windows CE laptop. With separately provided software, you can upload or download your address book, save pages to your hard drive, or transmit pages directly from your laptop's keyboard.

In addition to sending messages from pager-to-pager, there are five other ways to communicate. Every two-way pager comes with its own e-mail address. When people send you e-mail, it shows up on your pager. You send a reply, and the reply gets sent out over the Internet back to the original sender. Skytel also gives each pager an 800-number and a 7-digit PIN (you can have a private 800-number for $5 extra each month). You can also send faxes from the pager, or send messages directly to a phone number (an operator reads the message). And people can send messages to the pager from a special page on Skytel's Web site. The cool thing about using the Web site is that Skytel will tell you when the page has been delivered.

I won't say that two-way paging has changed my life, but it has dramatically cut my cell-phone costs while simultaneously making me feel as if I'm in closer contact with my wife. And while I was first turned off by the idea of picking out messages with the on-screen keyboard, I must admit that I've gotten pretty good at it.

My only complaint is coverage. While it works great outdoors or near windows, I've had problems in some restaurants and in basements at MIT.

Skytel offers a 30-day free trial to anybody with a credit-card and a good credit rating. A week into my free trial, I decided to send back my old numeric pager and keep the two-way. It's just better.

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Skytel can be reached at 800-456-3333. Its Web site is at http://www.skytel.com/

Technology writer Simson L. Garfinkel can be reached at plugged @simson.net

Skytel's new pager can slice cell-phone costs while keeping you in touch.