

'Long Tail' of music comes to cell phones

Lots of people would download music to their phones, if they could find something other than Gnarl Barkley, according to one mobile download infrastructure firm.

The proof of this comes from The Long Tail theory, which in the case of music downloads states that a few songs, like Barkley's "Crazy," will have a very high download rate, while classics like the Beatles and more obscure bands like The Go! Team are likely to only have a few downloads each, the chief executive officer of Targetize, Avichai Levy, explained.

Cellular operators can't afford to keep less popular songs on their limited portals. However, if users had access to unlimited numbers of songs, the collective download rate of songs like those by Beatles or The Go! Team would dwarf the songs currently in the Top 10, Levy told UPI.

Enter Herzliya, Israel-based Targetize, which late last week signed a deal with the Universal record label in Europe.

The company's software allows you to search the Internet for music from your mobile phone and returns with music files, pictures, lyrics, song lists and related artists -- what's called metadata, or data about the data.

Users' download choices are therefore no longer dictated by what the mobile operators think will sell.

"An effective search and discovery engine is the tipping point," Levy said. "When the songs are accessible to the mass market, it then makes business sense to allow people to find (songs on the Web)."

The first cellular customers to have access to the new search engine are in the Netherlands. There, users can launch a search with a few keystrokes. UPI tried searching for Green Day by entering "gre," and Green Day was the first result returned.

Normally, choosing Green Day from the results list will initially give a customer two music download choices -- one a small file, and one large -- as well as lyrics and related content, Levy said. The user then has the opportunity to click the "all" option, which will show more search results than just the initial two.

However, the "all" option was nowhere to be found on Levy's 2.5G phone, so he chose a 7-megabyte song file to download, warning that it was going to take a while.

After about three minutes, the download was only 1 percent complete.

Levy stressed that most song files are much smaller than 7 megabytes and would accordingly take less time to download.

The song downloads are slated to cost a little under \$2 each.

The search function can also deal with people who don't want to switch their keypads to letters -- a search on "2222" returned ABBA. People who can't spell will also be covered, as a search on "bitls" returned the Beatles.

Of course, the Internet is a big information base, and the company could offer a nearly unlimited selection. "We have to be careful ... we're holding back because of copyrights," Levy said.

However, Levy said the next stage was to take advantage of the Web's offerings by adding more metadata like gossip about the bands.

Mobile downloading is still in its early stages because content is so limited and hard to find.

Another Israeli cellular infrastructure company, Haifa-based Mobilitec, told UPI last week that in the course of studies and focus-group testing, it became apparent that although users wanted to download games or music, various problems with service and availability prevented them from getting what they wanted.

Mobilitec used teenagers to test and rate the downloading experience, because they are the most avid downloaders and reciprocally, most content is geared toward them. But once a wider selection of music is available, it won't be just 14-year-olds doing the downloading, Levy said.

He has predicted that in the near future, music will be primarily consumed via cell phones, rather than on PCs.

Technology analysis firm Gartner says "content, fashion and gaming rule" when it comes to consumer trends driving the market. According to a report from the firm's Tel Aviv Telecom, Mobile and Wireless conference held in March, content will include the games and ringtones consumers are already familiar with, as well as video-on-demand, music and narrowcasting.

Infrastructure will be important in this arena, as will mobile devices' continuing moves to "integrate music, fashion, gaming (and) banking with voice and messaging," the Gartner report said.

Overall, telecommunications revenues from voice use, the traditional role of telecommunication, are falling, according to Gartner. Messaging and content are gaining importance for these companies, and no telecom firm can afford to ignore this importance, the research firm maintains.

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