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Gadgets For Spies, Flights And Dating Isles

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When you book flight tickets, does the question of who will sit next to you on the plane make you anxious? Do you get distracted at work trying to remember if you switched off the iron? Or do you just want to find a decent friend? Worry no more. Browsing the latest hi-tech innovations, its seems IT firms are scrambling to offer solutions to very personal problems — from loneliness, to nervousness, to envy.

U.K. software developer Visible Technologies has developed an IT solution that transmits pictures taken by a video camera to a mobile phone. Presenting the product at a telecommunications conference in St. Petersburg last week, Tony McDonagh, the CEO of Visible Technologies, said that the system was invented to deal with security issues.

Called I-ONit, the system was designed to inform mobile phone subscribers when their home was being broken into by intruders. "However, it's not every day, or twice a day, that we face a burglary," McDonagh said.

He added that the service might be useful for anxious parents and pet owners eager to keep an eye on the situation inside their home while at work or out shopping. On the other hand for the more cynical or paranoid among us, the service could also help to keep tabs on a housebound spouse.

If the U.K. firm's innovation has people separated by distance, the latest invention from DataArt, a Russian-American software outsourcing company, focuses on human relations up close.

The company has launched a web-based service called AirTroductions, an in-flight registration and networking platform that could allow passengers to "find the perfect seatmate by matching up like-minded flyers," said the author of the idea, Peter Shankman.

The solution promises to sort passengers looking for business contacts, for a date or just for a quiet, fuss-free seatmate in harmonious pairs. People about to fly can enter their personal profile at the airtroductions.com web site, and the service will then match them up with another traveler who has similarly left their data online. The pair can then arrange to meet at the airport and ask the check-in assistant to seat them together, DataArt said.

Launched earlier this year, the service has already attracted over 1,000 registered users.

For those interested in match-making to find friends or romance on a more permanent basis, a spate of mobile phone content providers have in the last year set up special offline communities.

Using either SMS or Web Access Portals as its base, Russia's leading content provider i-Free created an off-line community project called Jamango.

The project creates a virtual island which subscribers access through their mobile phone. Using interactive icons, Jamango community users pick dating and informational services,

interactive games, music downloads, horoscopes, and anecdotes.

Since its launch last year, Jamango has attracted 1.2 million subscribers, while i-Free say the potential for the off-line community is as much as 60 million mobile phone users.

Jamango functions similarly to an Internet communication service, while being available to mobile phone subscribers no matter what handset they use.

Kirill Petrov, the managing director of i-Free, even saw this as a step towards the "evolution of the mobile services market." Rival company Nikita seemed to agree.

This year, the competitor launched its own version of a mobile phone community called Gorod Znakomstv (The City of Dating).

In high contrast, U.K. software developer Codant aims to conquer Russian and Ukrainian consumers by laying hope on people losing their mobile phones altogether.

Codant has worked out an IT solution that backs up on the computer all the data contained in a person's mobile phone in case of theft or loss, Jamal Berber, the head of Codant, said last week at a telecommunications conference organized by the Russo-British Chamber of Commerce.

In addition, Codant's software allows those that have an account with web chat applications ICQ and MSN to access them from a mobile phone.

Eldar Murtazin, leading expert at Mobile Research Group, notes that software innovations largely come from IT firms and not from mobile network operators, since the latter are only interested in traffic and not what stimulates the traffic.

"Telecom companies try to use GPRS and other similar schemes so as to minimize the involvement of mobile network operators in producing and delivering mobile content," Murtazin said. "So in a way, they are doing the work of the operators, and earning from it."

According to Mobile Research Group, the annual market for mobile software is worth $25 million. Only seven percent of that is spent on truly innovative, sophisticated services, Murtazin said.