

Pagers are ‘the bomb’ in teen market

Wireless device ditches its once shady image

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Twelve-year-old Taylor Jones knows exactly what she wants for Christmas. She has been longing for it since October, but it's not clothes or make-up or even the new Alanis Morissette CD. Jones wants a pager.

“I want one so my friends can find me. I'm thinking maybe the clear blue kind,” said Jones, who lives in Chicago. Her father, Scott Jones, says he is considering purchasing Taylor a pager so he “will know where she is.”

Once associated with teenage gangs and drug dealers, pagers got a bad wrap that's started to change over in the last couple of years. Now they are “in” for the average American teenager. And what some teens call “electronic leashes” are also “in” for parents who want to keep tabs on their teenagers.

According to a recent Motorola Inc. poll, 14 percent of all teenagers are currently using pagers.

The Personal Communications Industry Association (PCIA), a Washington, D.C.-based trade organization, reported that 77 percent of “wireless” teens use pagers, as opposed to 33 percent who use cell phones. And Northbrook-based Teenage Research Unlimited reported that 77 percent of teens consider pagers to be “in.”

The pager industry as a whole has grown dramatically in the 1990s. The number of pagers in the United States has nearly tripled since 1992, climbing from 15.3 million to approximately 50 million in 1997.

“The reality for pagers is they are now mainstream,” said Brenda Maxfield, communications director for the PCIA.

Maxfield said the teenage pager market is one of the fastest-growing markets for the wireless industry.

“Teen find they are wonderful devices to stay in touch with their friends, while parents find they are wonderful to stay in touch with their teens. Between all the clubs and after-school activities, this (pager) ensures that every parent knows where their children are,” she said.

According to the PCIA, 63 percent wireless teens say staying in touch with family has become the primary reason to own the device. Almost half of these teens purchased their pagers themselves, while 51 percent an adult purchased the pager for them.

Emily Baldaus' first pager was a birthday gift from her older sister. Emily, a 15-year-old sophomore at Evanston Township High School, uses her pager so her friends and mother can reach her. Emily's mom pages her frequently, which Emily said is "OK most of the time. Sometimes it's a hassle."

Emily's pager has become a vital way of connecting for her mother, Audrey Baldaus. An anesthesiologist at Evanston Northwestern Health Care, Audrey has been a working parent her whole life and has used a pager herself for many years. But she still has reservations about Emily's pager in the beginning.

"When her sister got her one for her birthday, I was not crazy about it at the time. It just seemed like a North Shore snobby kid sort of thing," Audrey said, changing her mind.