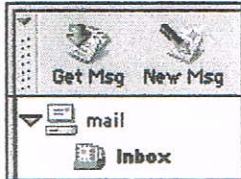




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Your Cell Phone Ring as an Extension of You

By Sean Neary
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At the Capitol Hill hot spot Bistro Bis one recent Thursday afternoon, the sounds of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" echoed throughout the restaurant. A few minutes later came the first few notes of Bach's "Badinerie," and then, of all things, the sounds of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

A talented cabaret act? A maitre'd playing with the dinner Muzak? Try the rings from diner's cell phones. The digital symphonies of Beethoven, Bach and even Harry Caray are but a few of the more than 30 different ring tones and melodies that most cell phones offer today.

With 94 million cell phone users in the United States, it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate one's ring from the rest of the wireless world. So, to avoid the awkwardness of fumbling for a ringing phone that's not theirs, creative consumers are personalizing their rings. In doing so, they may be revealing certain personality traits each and every time their phone rings.

"In many ways, your cell phone is an extension of your own personality," says Ted Selker of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Laboratory. "And the ring that you choose for your phone can say a lot about who you are."

If some doctors use inkblots to help their patients reveal their personalities, why not cell phone rings. It's simply a case of life in the 21st century: "A cell phone is a vehicle for communicating our sense of self," explains Selker, who prior to teaching at MIT taught a class in human computer interaction at Stanford University. "People pick a certain ring to project an image about themselves. Who they think they are and who they want other people to think they are."

All this from the ring from a mini-Motorola?

If you have the same ring as the woman sitting next to you--say, Mozart's "Symphony No. 40"--are you somehow compatible? It's possible that you both share a secret passion for classical music. Or, say you're about to meet a new business client--the one who could make or break your career--and you have no idea what to say to him besides "Hi" and "Nice weather."

Then suddenly his cell phone erupts into the Notre Dame fight song. Your client is no longer an enigma. You now know one of two things about him: He's either an alumnus of Notre Dame or a big football fan. Either way, you have a great way to open your conversation.

It may seem like a small thing, but choosing a cell phone ring is not to be taken lightly. "In many cases a cell phone ring serves as a first impression," says Kerry



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McIlroy, a 25-year-old law student at George Washington University who has a traditional ring selected on her Qualcomm 860 cell phone. "If I saw an attractive guy but then heard some silly ring go off on his cell phone, I might think twice before talking to him."

The same holds true in corporate confines as well as the social scene. Michael Strazzella, a 28-year-old lobbyist from Arlington, is used to having his meetings interrupted by a client's ringing cell phone. "It's hard to take a business associate seriously if they have something like the Looney Tunes theme ringing on their cell," says Strazzella, who has his Motorola set to vibrate. "I mean, really, is that the kind of impression you want to make to your business colleagues?"

While Selker can't recall any formal scientific studies that connect cell phone ring preferences with personality types, he does believe there is a definite correlation. "You'll find playful rings usually on the phones of students and people that are single," he explains. "A playful ring says that the person desires to be youthful."

On the other hand, he points out, those who have a classical music ring are "usually people that want to be taken seriously" and are not prone to taking risks. "They are the banker, the CFO, the CEO type," he says.

Neel Motiwala, a 27-year-old Bethesda resident, has the "Mexican Hat Dance" programmed into his Nokia 5160. "I wanted something different, a distinctive sound," he says. "So I picked a ring that reminds me of a song I used to hear when I was a kid." According to Selker's theory, Motiwala would be someone trying to recapture a bit of his youth. That profile is right on the money, says Motiwala's wife, Bobbie: "Neel is playful and fun. He is really a just big kid at heart. The ring is a perfect match for his personality."

Capturing a piece of Americana was important to author and historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony, 41, when he selected the ring on his Samsung mobile phone. "My ring is very comforting," says Anthony. "It reminds me of that bell you used to hear when you'd open the door in a small-town hardware store or soda shop."

Then there's Poppy Meier, the 24-year-old communications director for Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.). A resident of Capitol Hill, Meier considers herself polite and considerate of others. She has the aptly titled "Polite" ring tone selected on her Nokia 6160. "I wanted something that wasn't obnoxious," she says. "Not one of those annoying tunes that just goes on and on and bothers everyone around you."

While Meier's ring may not go so far as to say "pardon me Miss, but you have a call," it is quieter and simpler than other rings and, according to friends and colleagues, its chic simplicity is a dead, well, ringer for her personality.

"A cell phone ring can give you what we call 'leakage' into a person's actual traits," says Dan Korem, author of "The Art of Profiling: Reading People Right the First Time" (International Focus Press). "But you can't use the ring by itself to get a complete profile of someone. You also need to look at how a person dresses and how they perform actions. All together, that can reveal a trait."

Korem, who specializes in behavioral profiling and trains law enforcement agencies how to profile criminals, uses his and his wife's cell phone rings as examples. "She has the Charleston and I have the Lone Ranger," he says. "You could figure out some of our traits from those rings. She likes to be a little bit different, a little spunky. While I am a hard-charging type of guy. You could pick up a little bit on us from the rings, but you would have to have four or five other 'reads' to get a complete profile of who we are."

With the arrival of cell phones with Internet connectivity, users no longer are limited to the standard rings. Now people can download "designer" cell phone tunes from the Web. At sites like ringtone.net and phunkyphones.com, more than 300 different ring tones are available.

Everything from Britney Spears to the theme from "The Godfather" can be programmed as your phone's ring. Soon there will be Web sites where people can log on and compose their own rings. Talk about personalization.

"Most of our phones come with between 30 and 40 different rings," says Keith Nowak, a spokesperson for Nokia, the nation's leading cell phone manufacturer. "But more and more people are starting to download different rings from the Internet. They don't want to have the same ring as everybody else. They want to have a ring they can call their own."

So which ring is right for you? That depends. What kind of person is going to answer your phone?

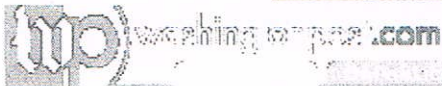
Sean Neary is the features editor for Voter.com.

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