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Forget park and ride, try dial and park

By Jethro Mullen
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A service starting in Paris next month is designed to make life somewhat easier for harried drivers by allowing them to find out, in real time, whether there are parking spaces available nearby by using their cellphones or GPS navigation devices.

The system will monitor the status of about 120 public parking garages across the French capital. From their phones, drivers will be able to find out whether a nearby garage is open and has places available.

"At certain times of day, 20 to 25 percent of vehicles are in search of a parking space. With this service, we should be able to improve the traffic flow," said François Le Vert, a representative of the Fédération Nationale des Métiers du Stationnement, an organization of French parking institutions that helped develop the system.

Eight companies are participating in the project: Orange and SFR, the two leading French mobile networks; Canal TP, NavX and V-Traffic, which specialize in travel and navigation software; the consulting firms Setec and Carte Blanche Conseil, and New Technology for Citizens, a grouping of firms that provides travel services.

The project does not have a catchy, dot-com-era name, instead preferring a more factual moniker, which translates as "universal system for information on parking areas." Participating parking garages are linked via Internet to a central server, and when the status of a garage changes - open, closed, full, vacancies - it sends a message to the server, which sends updates to the service providers.

At Orange, customers will be able to consult the parking database for free via the Orange World portal on any compatible cellphone. The only charges will be for downloading the data. Orange can find the caller's approximate position by determining which antenna the phone is connecting to, or the user can simply enter an address.

Alexandre Nepveu, Orange's director of marketing for telematic and automobile applications, said next year the carrier would add a service for cellphones equipped with GPS receivers, which will allow drivers to be guided to the nearest available garage much more precisely.

Nepveu left open the possibility that the service could be made available to customers of foreign networks in the future, but for now, the service will be available only in French and to Orange customers with contracts in France.

Any driver could sign up for the package offered by a Navx, according to Jean Cherbonnier, a co-founder of the company.

Navx's service is compatible with about half of all personal navigation devices on the market now, and Cherbonnier said he expected this to increase to 80 percent within six months. The company also markets a service that tells drivers where speed cameras are located.

Navx has plans to spread the system beyond France. "We're already in touch with parking garages in Germany," Cherbonnier said. "The German project is for February and will include about 800 garages across the country." After Germany, Cherbonnier would like to take aim at Switzerland, Italy, Britain, Austria and Spain.

A Massachusetts company, SpotScout, is taking a different approach. SpotScout is working to create a virtual marketplace for parking spaces in high-demand areas in Boston, New York and San Francisco.

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Using cellphones and the Internet, customers will be able to provide offers and requests for private parking spaces. Farther in the future, SpotScout hopes to allow users to trade information about the availability of parking spaces on the street.

Andrew Rollert, chief executive of SpotScout, said he had received a lot of inquiries from Europe and Asia.

Might drivers be putting themselves and others in danger by using these services at the wheel?

In Cherbonnier's opinion, the use of cellphones and personal navigation devices is preferable to rummaging through the glove compartment to find the relevant guide book.

"I don't think it's a danger," he said. "It's just a way of replacing books, guides and maps."

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