

Need diet advice? Call your nutrition coach

Cellphone users can e-mail photos of meals to nutritionists who monitor eating habits. 'Today' food editor Phil Lempert looks at this new service

By Phil Lempert

"Today" Food Editor

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Jennifer Aniston uses the Zone. Kirstie Alley prefers Jenny Craig. Chuck Norris likes the Total Gym. And Bill and Hilary Clinton? The South Beach Diet. From special foods to complicated workout regimens, celebrities, and civilians alike, are constantly on the hunt for the best food solutions to their healthy eating needs. Now, thanks to a program that fuses technology with nutrition, the search is over.

MyFoodPhone is a service that replaces the typical food journal with a camera phone. The world's first system to link individuals with their own nutritional coaches, MyFoodPhone is designed to help customers make healthier choices through the tracking of their daily food intake — combined with customized advice. The program was launched in May on Sprint, but other carriers are set to offer the feature within the next few months.

The concept is simple: customers take pictures of the food they eat during meals or snacks, and e-mail those pictures to the MyFoodPhone Web site. A nutritional advisor then provides biweekly feedback (that is videotaped and accompanied by other relevant health videos) based on the client's eating habits. Advisors are not nutritionists, but they are trained by registered dieticians to identify food and give nutritional counseling. There are no complex rules to follow, foods to avoid or specific vitamins and nutrients to add up. All a customer has to do is take a picture and punch in some specifics about his meal on his www.myfoodphone.com homepage.

The program also teaches users how to measure their food portions more accurately than they may have done in the past. This is an attempt to give users a grasp on what they are actually eating, says Marc Onigman, a spokesman for MyFoodPhone, who is hopeful that this type of knowledge will encourage honest reporting. After all, the act of taking pictures does not burn fat by itself, even though it engages users in a visual quantitative way. Clients who really want to change need to eat healthier and exercise.

"The most powerful thing I've found is that it really puts the work on the user. You could eat a pizza and take a picture of a salad and no one will know except you. The advisors are there to provide encouragement and suggestions, but in the end it's up to you to make the necessary adjustments," he says. "The way we eat is mindless. We're trying to make it more mindful."

Because cell phones are always with us these days, they provide a unique opportunity for shoppers, food brands, supermarkets and ... point-of-sale coupons.

Many younger shoppers are discarding those things that are inaccessible online or via their cell phones. At risk are those fleeting paper items, like newspapers and Sunday supplements. With a \$15 billion retail promotion budget up for grabs, we can expect lots of innovation that may have been promised by online coupons, but because of the related fraud issues fell flat.

Cellfire, which is currently piloting in California, is literally a coupon software program for our cell phones, which enables the user to save money at their favorite stores (and restaurants), without the risk of spam or releasing personal information to 3rd parties.

The concept is simple. Download the software from the Cellfire Web site (www.cellfire.com), launch the program from the applications section of your cell phone and local deals are displayed. Cashiers then punch in a coupon number at the time of purchase. Once redeemed, the coupon is automatically discarded from the phone, or updated with additional deals. Usage charges only apply to the initial software and future coupon downloads and rates are a fraction of one cent per kilobyte (a typical coupon is one kilobyte). The service itself is free.

According to Brent Dusing, CEO of Cellfire, mobile coupons have higher redemption rates (between 15 and 25 percent), are portable, and include discounts from brand name businesses like Hollywood Video, T.G.I. Fridays, and Bath and Body Works. With redemption rates of conventional paper coupons as low as one percent, this software couldn't come at a more opportune time, he says.

The big benefit for food brands and supermarkets is that these digital coupons can be updated on the fly, used to promote new products, and give an edge on competitors in the exact period of time that they are needed. Imagine being able to offer coupons for bagels or donuts between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. to shoppers who usually just buy coffee.

Cellfire is currently available through Cingular, but other service providers are expected to offer it to their customers in the future. Over the next 12 months, Cellfire plans to give shoppers the ability to set their own coupon preferences, select their favorite stores and request specific discounts.