



Dieting by Camera Phone

Nutrax and MyFoodPhone offer ways to shed pounds by sending images wirelessly to dieticians.

August 3, 2005

Dieters can get help losing weight from their camera phones through two services, including one that launched on Wednesday.

Nutrax announced its free service that combines camera phones with blogs. Members can snap pictures of what they're eating through their phone and send the photos to an online food diary.

They can then share the food blog with their friends and relatives, who can monitor their progress by checking out the photos and graphs and send them suggestions on what to eat and not to eat.

- ADVERTISEMENT -

At the same time, users can receive more professional counseling on their eating habits from a registered dietitian who advises the New York City-based company.

"Tracking what you eat is essential for results, but most people are too busy for a manual diet log," said Nutrax co-founder Leslie Bonci, a registered dietitian. "This is the solution."

Ms. Bonci is also the director of sports nutrition at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and she works with the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers, who probably require a special diet of their own.

A slightly older service is MyFoodPhone, run by a Canadian company that is currently offering service only in the tri-state New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut area.

The service launched at the end of February and now has about 200 users, according to Marc Onigman, vice president of business development. He hopes to expand the service nationwide in the United States and Canada by mid-September by signing with wireless carriers that have a national footprint.

It doesn't matter which carrier a user has, however. Anybody in the area with a camera phone can use the service.

"We decided to roll it out slowly to see what traffic we would get," said Mr. Onigman. The choice of the tri-state area wasn't because people have more of a weight problem there, but because Ste.-Foy, Quebec-based MyFoodPhone has its U.S. office nearby in Boston.

Unlike Nutrax, users don't get a food "blog," but they do get something similar: an individual web page where they can send images of their meals and share the pictures with their dietician. The web page is secure and HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) compliant.

MyFoodPhone has "a certain number" of independent registered dieticians affiliated with the service, according to Mr. Onigman, and is also looking for more RDs to come on board. The company charges

customers \$99 per month.

Beyond the Diet

The privately held, silent-investor-funded company plans to extend its reach not only geographically, but also to other markets besides those people looking to shed some pounds.

Mr. Onigman said the dieting product is only the first that the company will offer over the next 12 to 18 months. MyFoodPhone is looking for other ways to connect customers to healthcare and wellness providers, besides nutrition.

The company is also working on developing devices that combine a camera phone with a glucose meter for diabetics who need to keep track of their blood sugar readings, as well as the amount of insulin they take and the food they eat.

In addition, MyFoodPhone is partnering with Portland, Maryland-based Gentag on embedding sensors in a camera phone that will allow an individual to control their asthma or allergy problems. Other devices could have sensors that monitor the ultraviolet rays from the sun and warn people who are at risk of skin cancer if they're in a high-risk area.

Yet another device could safeguard people with severe allergic reactions against possible food pathogens.

Little wands protruding from the phone could be inserted into a bowl of soup or a piece of cake. If the sensors detect any dangerous ingredients, the phone could warn the user, saying, for example, not to eat that slice of carrot cake because it contains nuts.

MyFoodPhone is involved in several research projects, including a study with Partners Telemedicine, an organization affiliated with the Harvard University teaching hospitals. In addition, MyFoodPhone is working with the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, on a paper validating the protocol of taking pictures instead of writing down what a patient eats.

"This couldn't be done even a year ago," said Mr. Onigman. "But now with the clarity of pictures on the new camera phones and the increased bandwidth on the network, it's possible."

© 1993-2005 Red Herring, Inc. All rights reserved.