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Satellite Phones Can Create Happy Endings

By M. Brian Barnett

Guest Commentary

Every year about this time, we New Mexicans hear a familiar story. A lost snowmobiler, snowboarder or hiker, unaccustomed to the volatile weather of the southwest, loses cell phone coverage (or forgets to take any communication device) and requires rescuing by our dedicated volunteer search and rescue teams. Sometimes, there is a happy ending: "The cell phone finally had a signal so we were able to contact 911." These are fortunate outcomes, but the rescues are predicated on a risky hope: that one's cell phone will have service at the time of the incident, or that one is conscious or in a position to dial out after an incident occurs.

This year, after witnessing the same, I feel compelled to write about affordable, lifesaving satellite communications technology. Granted, I own a satellite communications company. I am in the communications business. I am also a husband and father. As such, it is my opinion, that certain activities like back-country skiing, hiking, or sailing around the world, should not be undertaken without taking along a satellite phone, or a Web-based tracking device.

Hand-held satellite phones first entered the market around 1999. Initially, they were expensive and bulkier than cell phones. Since then, the satellite phone market has matured. In 2007, a new palm-sized satellite-based location device came on the market. This device costs around \$160, and for a yearly fee of about the same, shows your exact location to your loved ones back home over the Internet. The device can also be used to send pre-programmed e-mail messages out such as, "I am OK and am having a great time." Or, "I have fallen— please send help." A number of new hand-held satellite phone entrants are scheduled to hit the market in 2008 and early 2009 that will be more affordably priced (about the same price as a high-end PDA), as well as offer more features that modern customers are accustomed to in mobile phones.

Those of us who enjoy the great outdoors have had many occasions to observe that our cell phones do not have coverage everywhere we like to hike or trek. Satellite phones, on the other hand, have global coverage. As long as one is not inside a cave, or under thick forest canopy, your phone call will get through. Throw in a portable solar panel, and you can make sure your battery remains charged when you need to use it.

Jim Reist, a local Albuquerque attorney, used a satellite phone in Bolivia to call a local guide to come in and relocate his climbing group to another mountain once bad weather had settled in their original base. Participants in a recent America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race used a satellite phone to contact the operations center to inquire whether they should attempt to climb over the Sangre de Cristo mountains near Taos. The operations center advised them to land immediately as weather conditions over the mountain range were impassable.

Scouting organizations and schools rent satellite phones on overnight camping or hiking trips. Girls and boys camps are including satellite phones as a key part of their camping kit, right along with the usual tents, food and water supplies. Besides obvious safety benefits, the devices also reduce liability for the camps.

I urge all outdoor enthusiasts, before embarking on your next adventure, to consider packing a satellite device in the name of safety, security, and peace of mind— for you and your loved ones.

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