

Saved by the cell

BY ANN KERR
Special to The Globe and Mail

ROBERT Katz, a product development manager for Stratos Mobile Networks Inc. of Ottawa, travels the world putting together deals to supply satellite services to governments and industries like oil companies and fishing fleets. He's used to handling emergencies.

But the distress call he received en route to a business meeting in California three years ago tops them all. It was literally a matter of life and death.

A Japanese sailor entered in an international yacht race sponsored by British Oxygen Corp. of London was in serious trouble. His boat was leaking water rounding treacherous Cape Horn, off the tip of South America.

Mr. Katz, who set up satellite operations for the event, was paged by the communications centre in Charleston, S.C., which was tracking the race. No matter that he was in a plane over Chicago at the time. Could he arrange a rescue?

Mr. Katz swung into action, using a satellite phone on the plane to contact Charleston and get a fix on the yacht's location.

HEROICS / Mobile computers, cell phones, satellite hook-ups and pagers come to the rescue.

"Then I put that call on hold, jumped over the seat in front of me and grabbed another phone. You wouldn't believe the looks," says Mr. Katz.

Within minutes, he connected with technical help all over the world: to a ship-rescue co-ordination centre in Chile to find the nearest merchant vessel; to the yacht; to the International Maritime Satellite Organization (Inmarsat) data base in London that has the phone numbers of all satellite installations, including ships; back to Charleston to keep tabs on the leaking yacht. He then conferred all the calls together to direct the merchant vessel to rendezvous with the endangered boat.

"We were able to save the guy by using multiple technologies and the knowledge I have of what to do and who to call. But that wouldn't have helped if they couldn't reach me

quickly to begin with," Mr. Katz says.

Key to the rescue was his "virtual assistant," the telephone routing system by Wildfire Communications Inc. of Boston that he subscribes to. It can put calls through to him, no matter where he is. Clients always reach

Robert Katz: 'You can have all the greatest technology in the world, but it doesn't mean a thing if you don't know how to get the most from it.'

(GREG LOCKE/The Globe and Mail)

him at the same number, though he may in fact be on any one of a number of cell phones or stationary phones or using his pager. He simply phones into the Wildfire server, verbally relays his schedule and it tracks him down.

There aren't many occasions when business travellers like Mr. Katz can use their portable technology to save a life. But there are plenty of examples of how it can save the day.

Often, it's the most sophisticated portable technology that makes all the difference. But not always.

Bruce Flanagan, an account manager in residential mortgages at the Royal Bank Group of Companies of Toronto, spends most of his time at clients' offices and homes, building sites and real estate offices or in his car travelling between them all. As a top performer, processing about 30 mortgages a month, he's heavily dependent on his IBM ThinkPad computer, cell phone and pager.

"Typically, people only have two days now to secure their financing before the deal closes. If I'm not reachable right away, they're going to go to someone else."

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Saving the day

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Luckily for a certain trade commissioner to Canada, Mr. Flanagan has hung onto his six-year-old Motorola voice pager, what some might consider antiquated technology.

The diplomat was on the verge of closing an offer to buy a \$600,000 house in the Toronto suburb of North York, contingent on the financing. At the last moment, the bank he'd been dealing with withdrew its promise of a mortgage because he wasn't a permanent resident. The situation was critical — only minutes to go and there were other offers waiting in the wings.

It was just before 5 p.m. on a Friday when Mr. Flanagan was contacted in his car by the frantic real estate agent.

"I was on the car phone on another deal, but I could hear the voice page come in. If I was using another pager, I might not have responded in time. The newer pagers display a phone number or a typed-in script, but that doesn't convey the same kind of urgency," Mr. Flanagan says.

He called the trade commissioner immediately and got him to fax the particulars. "There was absolutely no risk whatsoever. It was excellent real estate, he had a good down payment and a senior job."

It went right down to the wire, but Mr. Flanagan was able to reach all the necessary contacts and get approval. Since then, he's secured a mortgage for the deputy trade commissioner, too.

Road warriors credit the immediate response time of their portable technology for some of their most heroic efforts. Certainly, it's critical to the Watt Design Group of Toronto, environmental and graphics design experts, predominantly in the retail sector. The company is outfitted with about 20 Toshiba laptops, including a super-powered Tecra 740 CDT, and an Olympus digital camera. That high-end equipment more than paid for itself after a major U.S. retailer in California made a panic call to Watt one evening this summer.

"They had some design flaws that had gotten out of hand," says Ira Teich, Watt chief executive office and managing director, "and their board of directors was demanding immediate action. We grabbed our Toshiba 740 CDT and our digital camera and flew to the West Coast next morning to bid on the contract."

From the airport, Mr. Teich and his team sped directly to one of the sites and literally hit the ground running. They zipped through the store, jotting notes and snapping shots of

problem areas. In the taxi on the way to the client's office, they downloaded the pictures into the computer.

"On the ride over, we were able to format our observations, strategies and solutions, complete with company graphics and pictures. By the time we reached their office, we didn't just have a boilerplate package about how great The Watt Design Group is. We had a full-blown, customized PowerPoint presentation about exactly what needed to be fixed," Mr. Teich says.

They got the job. And it only took three hours from when they landed.

On a train in Spain last year travelling to Madrid, Mr. Katz had even less time to help a colleague in South America win a contract. A Stratos salesman in Buenos Aires got a last-minute tip that a shipping company needed a fleet management system. But he didn't have any specific information with him. So he got hold of Mr. Katz on the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) phone he uses in Europe.

"Not only did I have a software presentation with me, I'd just come from meeting with a new partner, an integrator in Seville that had a new way of providing just that kind of service," says Mr. Katz.

So, from the train, he accessed the Web sites of both companies to download information on the one's specific needs and the other's products, plus their logos. Then he put it all together in a new presentation and sent it from a pay phone on the train to his colleague's hotel room. Because the connection quality of his cell phone wasn't good enough to handle the transmission, he had to use his old acoustic coupler modem.

Typically, Mr. Katz travels with the most powerful and up-to-date portable technology, including three cell phones, a Palm Pilot Professional organizer, a 100-MHz zip drive and two state-of-the-art laptops — a Compaq ProLinea and a new Dell with 166 MHz and MMX — just in case one should fail. But he always packs a primitive acoustic coupler modem, basically a cable that attaches with suction cups, for the times when fancier telecommunications connections just don't work.

"It's part of my basic contention that you can have all the greatest technology in the world, but it doesn't mean a thing if you don't know how to get the most from it, especially when things go wrong," says Mr. Katz.