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Start-Up Brings Free Calls to Mobile Phones

By [VICTORIA SHANNON](#)

PARIS — “In a few years’ time, we’ll look back and say how strange it was that we didn’t always use [Facebook](#) on our mobile phones,” predicts Avi Shechter, an Israeli technology entrepreneur.

Mr. Shechter, who was a general manager of the pioneering ICQ chat service that [AOL](#) bought in 1998, now runs Fring, which is essentially a mobile-phone version of Skype. He believes that just about everything that people like to do on the Internet at their desks today -- like network on Facebook -- they will soon want to do on their cellphone.

“We have turned the corner -- people now expect to take their Internet experience mobile,” he said.

Like Skype on personal computers, Fring uses peer-to-peer Internet technology to send calls from mobile phones over the Internet at no charge. Like Skype, both sender and receiver have to have the Fring application on their phones for the calls to be free. And as with Skype, people can also use Fring to have instant-message text chats on their cellphones.

Fring and its various start-up rivals -- Truphone, Yeigo, Rebtel, Jajah and Skype’s own mobile version — are services that grate on mobile phone operators, since they exploit the data subscriptions that the carriers offer. With Fring, callers are not paying for using air time or sending SMS text messages, Mr. Shechter said.

“In the short term, not all of them like it that much,” he said, “but at the end of the day, they need to serve their customers.”

Last week, Fring upgraded its service by adding support for users of [Yahoo](#) and AIM to the other online communities it supports, like Skype, MSN Messenger, [Google](#) Talk, ICQ and Twitter. Fring users can also now transfer files -- including MP3s, digital photos and video clips -- to one another.

While Fring is a free download and free to use, callers still pay their normal monthly data charges. The service requires a smartphone using the Symbian 8 or 9, Windows Mobile 5 or 6, or UIQ operating systems, which means about 450 cellphone models. That would apply to about 250 million of the three billion or so active mobile subscribers today.

In its newest version, Fring is available in six languages besides English. Mr. Shechter said people in 160 countries are “Fringsters,” but noted that not a single country contributes more than 8 percent of the traffic.

After a second round of venture capital funding last year, Mr. Shechter is concentrating on creating a market and not yet on generating revenue. Shechter said Fring was attracting 100,000 registered users a month, though he would not specify the number of active users. “I think it reflects users’ need to be connected not just when they are in front of their PCs,” he said. “At the end of the day, the mobile device is a voice-centric device, but with the addition of chat and file transfer, convergence is finally here.

“We see ourselves as an Internet company that is focused on the mobile area,” he said.

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