



TECH

Cell-phone blockers shush rude users

Churches, movie theaters, even the U.N. headquarters want to block cell phone signals to enforce silence during events. Cell phone service providers are against it. STEPHANIE HOO wades into the debate.

Tuesday, 7 March, 2006, 17:42 EST, US

By STEPHANIE HOO

Some movie theaters want to jam cell phone signals to thwart rude talkers. Cell phone service providers are against it, arguing that it amounts to a theft of their business. A straightforward controversy? Not even close.

For starters, jamming signals is illegal in the U.S., but it's easy to do. Theaters, churches and other places that want relief from ringtones are learning how to block signals naturally with walls or barriers. This, too, is very easy. But what if someone needs to call 911? Exceptions for emergency calls can be made even if most calls are blocked.

Jammers are small electronic devices that interfere with a signal and can be turned on and off. They're forbidden in the U.S., but, like much contraband, are readily available. It took asap two seconds to find one for sale on eBay.

Although it would be frustrating for foiled callers, jamming can be useful if its regulated properly, particularly in emergencies, says Howard Melamed, president and CEO of CellAntenna Corp., in Coral Springs, Fla., which helps firms solve communications problems.

Melamed thinks it's ridiculous that local law enforcement can't jam signals, especially since terrorists have used cell phones to set off bombs in attacks overseas. At present, only federal officials can jam signals according to FCC rules, he says.

"We want to see greater restrictions put on the use of jamming equipment by the public ... and at the same time, allow the free use of jamming equipment by our law enforcement officers," he says. "The problem is, this balance doesn't exist."

Melamed stopped by asap's New York newsroom for a chat after meeting with staff at U.N. headquarters. It seems even the U.N. wants less cell phone noise at its press conferences.



Howard Melamed, CEO of CellAntenna Corporation, wants federal law changed so police can block cell phone signals in an emergency. (AP Photo/J. Kamp)

You're in the business of helping businesses manage cell phone signals, yet you're against legalizing jamming equipment. Why?

Melamed: It's far too dangerous to have the public handling jamming equipment. ... Bank robbers are using jamming equipment. The whole world is going to be using this type of stuff in a way that's devious.

(But for) your local bomb squad in New York City, for instance, or even the subway authority, it's illegal for them to use a piece of jamming equipment even if they have a known threat -- such as a bag with a bomb in it with an antenna sticking up.

Let's get them properly outfitted with the means they need to protect themselves and the public. And the theaters, so what? So you have some noise? I mean, it's a crazy aspect.

So what should movie theaters do?

Melamed: It's a "cellular calming," we call it. ... It eliminates the use of cellular signals inside the building through natural passive means (and) adding in another type of system that allows someone to make a 911 call.

That is done naturally by the way, perfectly legal, through building materials that are out there right now. ... Anything that's made out of concrete and reinforcing steel and metal.

What about other businesses? Is it true that hotels block cell phones so they can charge you to use the phone in your room?

Melamed: They don't have to do anything out of the ordinary -- it's already like that. You go above the 30th floor of any of the hotels, you're not going to be able to use your cell phone.

A lot of our customers hotel-wise are actually pumping the signal into the lobby areas and business areas -- restaurants, function halls -- so people can use their cell phones. They recognize that unless you have the use of a cell phone inside a building, they're losing their customers.

I mean, it's not great to see Sony Ericsson or one of these large companies hold a convention at one of the hotels and everybody has to go outside and use their cell phone in the rain and snow.

—

Stephanie Hoo is asap's business writer.

—

Want to comment? Sound off at soundoffasap@ap.org .

©2006 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed. Learn more about our [Privacy Policy](#).

NT PAGE