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## Theaters in a cellphone jam

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**LAS VEGAS** - The scene is all too familiar to the modern moviegoer: The theater is pin-drop quiet as Ben and Jen are about to declare undying love for each other. Suddenly, the latest ring tone from Coldplay or 50 Cent blares from a teenager's purse, filling the darkened movie house. Not only is the moment lost, but so is the next, and the one after that, as patrons shush the naughty teen while she giggles her way through a phone chat with a friend. "I'm at a movie ... a movie! Right, where do you want to meet? Oh, it's really good, I'll tell you all about it. Later!"

This could all change. This past week the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO) pondered blocking cellphone signals as a way to improve the cinema experience. The idea was a hot topic in the nation's gambling capital this past week when theater owners from coast to coast met to preview the summer lineups from movie studios and trade tips on combating falling movie theater attendance. The 6,000-strong membership of NATO voted to authorize its board to look into changing federal laws that currently prevent them from using cellphone-jamming equipment in theaters.

"We have an issue with rude patron behavior," says John Fithian, president of NATO. "Cellphones going off in theaters is the most pronounced problem," he says, adding that a recent NATO survey of theatergoers showed that nearly 80 percent favored some form of cellphone jamming. "The overwhelming majority of our own members support the idea as well."

For the moment, cellphone-jamming equipment is illegal in the US, even for agencies such as local police or fire departments. However, other countries are beginning to crack down on rude cellphone users. France recently changed its laws to allow movie theaters to use the jamming technology. A number of Catholic churches in Mexico use Israeli military jamming gear to stop parishioners from interrupting services with their wireless chatting (presumably with mere mortals).

Not surprisingly, the cellular industry's national trade group, CTIA - The Wireless Association, is against the idea. "We're vehemently opposed for the simple reason that it's no one's right or prerogative to deny emergency communications to go through," says John Walls, CTIA vice president of public affairs. "That's why jamming is illegal. These are the public airwaves - they are for everyone, and everyone has a right to use them."

Companies that manufacture jamming equipment are also opposed, on similar grounds. "Jamming equipment should only be used by the government, such as the police and the bomb squads, not the general public," says Howard Melamed of CellAntenna, one such company. "Jamming is a weapon that should only be used against illegal activities."

Mr. Melamed and others point out that there are less severe measures theater owners could take, such as paint that blocks signals and a new technology his own company will be offering by summertime, which he dubs "cell calming" technology. It allows emergency calls to go through while stopping general-purpose calls without jamming the full spectrum of cell calls. (Melamed is tight-lipped about the technology, saying only that it has a "patent pending.")

However, others such as Bay Area moviegoer Peter Brown says the issue is one of basic manners. Mr. Brown, a marketing consultant, says he and "a good friend" have found that a

lightweight water pistol will work wonders with chatty cellphone users. Though he does not recommend this technique to others, he notes with some satisfaction that they've never been caught. If the guilty party looks back to see who has nipped his neck with water, "we simply practice the quick whip-around and affronted look that insinuates that you, too, have been hit."

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