

IT/Comms: iPhone App provides global panic button

The marketing is like a scene from a cheap horror movie. If the term "scareware" had not already been invented, it would be for this product. It's the kind of thing you want to hate, the kind of thing you hope you will never wish you had bought. But, strangely, many business travellers might one day be pleased they did.

Co-Incidentally, two items of news appeared in our wire reports this morning that fit together nicely.

The first is the growth in attacks on those out for early morning walks and exercise, often bag snatching by men on motorbikes. This menace is growing worldwide, but is particularly bad in countries where poverty is rife and where motorcycles are more common than cars.

The second is information about I AM Safe, a new App for the iPhone from Melbourne, Aus company Xpertise Mobile.

We can think, instantly, of thousands of people who are out late at night, or in the early morning, or whose work routinely takes them to unfamiliar places.

Many of us know people, perhaps even ourselves, that have a prepared SMS text in their phones saying "Help" and information on whereabouts and who to contact locally.

But that's a bit haphazard: first, your point of contact has to see the message, secondly, to be able to reach the emergency local number you provided and then they need to trace where your phone was when the message was sent: and the fact that many phones show only the time messages were received not when they were sent makes this impossible.

So, imagine if your phone knew where it was, using GPS location, for example. And if, with one push, you could alert one of more people that you needed help and your exact position.

That's what "i am Safe" does.

But it's cleverer than that.

The system will ring your phone immediately you send the message. So if you are under imminent attack, the sound may put off attackers.

If you turn on the feature, it will transmit voice sound in real time - one way so no chance the phone will make a noise to alert anyone to the service. This allows for both monitoring of the situation you are in, plus record it on I Am Saf'e server for evidential purposes.

The position of the phone is monitored until the alert is cancelled.

So, what's the catch?

Obviously, it's not free and if you don't use it it seems a waste - but so does insurance.

It needs GPS data - and that means you need to be in the range of a service provider who provides access to GPS - this may be a big problem if you are roaming outside major cities, as will 3G coverage.

So, for urban adventurers, including auditors sent overseas, it's probably got value. Similarly for Air Crew, whose time-shifted lives often mean going out for a walk at all the wrong times. Perhaps parents worried about offspring working late in nightclubs, etc.

But for the more intrepid, coverage looks to be more of a problem, as is the fact that the location appears to be calculated to within 205 metres. That's horizontally, because that's how GPS works.

Sitting in our offices in Kuala Lumpur where residential and commercial buildings are combined, we've done a quick tot-up of what's within a 400 metre diameter. The answer (we think) is more than 750 apartments, more than 30 car parks (open and under buildings) 30 restaurants and bars, two primary thoroughfares, five side roads and four alleys, more than 250 floors of offices ranging from single units to bank headquarters.

That's a lot of places to hide.

Perhaps the best plan is also to carry an avalanche warning radio bleeper to provide pinpointing once rescue arrives.