**Nextel Promotes Service As Public Safety Backup**

**By Sue Marek**

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It's been two years since the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, and although much has been done to better coordinate emergency communications, interoperability challenges still plague public safety officials in many cities across the United States.

But for Nextel Communications Inc., those existing interoperability challenges could equate to opportunity. The carrier is promoting its service to public safety officials as a way to help alleviate potential interoperability glitches and serve as a backup communication system to existing private wireless systems. The company's public sector sales, which includes the public safety and government markets, account for 18 percent of the company's new sales, according to H. Leon Frazier, vice president of the public sector for Nextel.

Though the company asserts it by no means wants to replace existing private wireless systems, it has taken a proactive approach to targeting the public safety sector. Over the past few months, Nextel hosted nine interoperability conferences across the country, gathering public safety officials to discuss interoperability problems and how Nextel's product could be used in conjunction with their existing systems to help emergency workers respond to situations.

Touting its network reliability, capacity and coverage, Nextel executives say the company's service provides public safety officials with one handset and two network paths, the cellular interconnect path and the Direct Connect two-way radio path. At the same time, Nextel executives warn that their solution is about providing interoperability to groups that need to communicate and not about putting all first responders in "one big chat room."

In fact, the company is working on several applications for its service that it believes can help first responders. For example, the company developed a Priority Direct Connect system that allows first responders to have priority access over commercial Nextel subscribers. According to Rand Bailin, Nextel's vice president, corporate development and critical infrastructure markets, the company has designated priority settings one through five for first responders which ensures that their calls will get placed ahead of other Nextel subscribers. "Priority connect moves lower priority traffic off the network," Bailin says. "This is vitally important."

In addition, the company is working on an online interoperability directory, which it will make available to its public safety clients. That directory will help link up appropriate agencies during an emergency and provide information such as who is in command of a certain incident.

Nextel also is working to incorporate many existing private wireless features into its service. For example, one service in the works is Talk Around, which will provide emergency personnel with the ability to communicate even if separated from the network. This peer-to-peer communications service, which currently is offered by existing private radio systems, will be available from Nextel early next year.

Perhaps more important than specific public safety applications is network coverage, which Nextel says it is committed to improving over the next year. At the Denver Interoperability Conference, where Nextel highlighted its existing work with the city of Denver (Denver public safety agencies are using several hundred Nextel radios), Bailin said the company plans to invest $24 million in its Colorado network in the next few years, growing the number of cell sites by nearly 50 percent. "We want to take this network and make it available to first responders and build off of it," Bailin says. "We want to take advantage of this asset."

Of course, Nextel's courting of the public safety market is about more than just garnering new business for its service. The company also is using these interoperability forums to appeal to public safety officials to join Nextel in its effort to reorganize the jumbled 800 MHz spectrum block.

Although many public safety organizations, including the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the Association of Chiefs of Police and the National Sheriff's Association, support Nextel's proposed Consensus Plan, Nextel founder and Vice Chairman Morgan O'Brien says that opponents to the plan, which include CTIA, the United Telecom Council, AT&T Wireless, Verizon Wireless and other wireless carriers, have been very effective. He urges public safety officials to step up their efforts and become more vocal in their support of the Consensus Plan. "Get familiar and active on this issue," O'Brien says. "The allocation of spectrum for public safety is inadequate."

Nextel's public safety efforts may be two-fold–generating new business and garnering supporters for its Consensus Plan–but success in this arena could mean big business for the carrier, which is facing increasing pressure from its competitors.