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## Staying in Touch Only a Thumb Tap Away

Resourceful Youths Are Finding Imaginative Uses for Text Messaging

By David Betancourt  
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As Holly Williams chatted with friends in the Red Room at Love nightclub in Northeast one Friday night, six unfamiliar guys surrounded her, danced a bit and then asked the young woman repeatedly to leave the club for some after-hours fun.

The guys wouldn't take no for an answer. So Williams, 21, discreetly tapped a text message into her new T-Mobile Sidekick 3.

"I sent a message to my guy friend telling him to come get me," said Williams, of [College Park](#). "And about five minutes later, he was there to grab us from the crowd."

Tech-savvy young people are finding ever more inventive ways to use text messages, and wireless communication companies are paying attention, introducing cellphones, such as the Sidekick 3, designed to simplify the process.

The Sidekick and the new [Verizon](#) Envy have full keyboards and are aimed at customers who send frequent text messages. In November, [Sprint](#) introduced the LG-150, its first phone with a dedicated key for text messaging. Similar to the key for a camera phone, the text message key allows a user to start a message at the press of a button, instead of having to scroll through a phone screen menu.

The new cellphones are all the rage among the young adults and teenagers who are undoubtedly helping to drive the explosive growth of text messaging. A currently popular TV commercial for [Cingular](#) offers unlimited text messaging for an extra \$5 a month. It features a mother and her young daughter (maybe middle-school age) discussing a bloated phone bill caused by excessive text messaging. The clearly exasperated mother asks: "Who are you texting 50 times a day?"

Della Stevens, 14, a freshman at Mount Vernon High School in [Alexandria](#), had to hand over her new T-Mobile Razr phone to her mother shortly after getting it in January. Della sent 3,000 text messages that month, escalating her cellphone bill to \$800. She said she thought her plan offered free text messaging.

She was mostly chatting with her high school buddies, especially at times when talking on the cellphone was not an option, she said. Once, she received a text message from a friend during a live school concert.

"I just continued the conversation with him through texting because I couldn't talk while I was in the audience," Della said.

When Della's mother got the bill and saw the number of text messages her daughter had sent and the associated costs, she wasn't amused.

"She called me from work and told me to put the phone in her room," Stevens said. "She said she'd give it back to me when I learn to be more responsible with it and she thinks I'm ready."

The exponential growth of text messaging can be traced to Sept. 11, 2001, when people in crisis discovered that their text messages got through when cellphone voice lines were jammed, said [John Johnson](#), a spokesman for Verizon Wireless.

Verizon Wireless customers sent 5 billion text messages last September, more than double the same time in 2005, Johnson said. By December, the number of text messages had jumped to 6.3 billion a month, triple the volume the previous year.

Many parents and their children sent text messages back and forth during the shooting rampage last month at [Virginia Tech](#). Now, some universities are studying how to use text messaging to reach their students in emergencies.

Some local nightclubs already have figured out how to use text messaging to reach their young partygoers with instant news about upcoming entertainment. Ti' Jean Beezer, assistant to Love owner Marc Barnes, said he often uses the Web site [clubtexting.com](#), which is designed to help nightclubs promote their events through text messaging. Beezer said he gets cellphone numbers from patrons and regularly enters them onto a database at the site. He can type one message and reach 1,000 patrons at once.

"You don't have to worry about doing it yourself, texting one by one, thousands of people," Beezer said. "It's very effective."

Inside the clubs, patrons are just as likely to be text messaging each other as dancing.

Jasmin Meyers, 21, of College Park, who also owns a Sidekick 3, said text messages are the perfect way to communicate in a noisy place. The four-level Love, for example, is usually crowded, and when the music is blasting, normal conversation can be practically impossible. On any given night, it's common to see patrons sending text messages on their cellphones, sometimes to friends standing beside them.

Meyers said that she often goes out with a large group of friends and that she keeps track of them through text messaging. "It's not like I can call, because no one can hear each other once they're inside the club," she said. "So texting is really the only way of communicating."

There's another advantage, Williams said, "especially if there's an annoying guy in your face that you don't want to talk to, and you're trying to get your friend to move somewhere else so that you don't have to talk to him anymore."

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