

Mobile Data Cards: Not Just For Business Travelers Anymore, Reports Nielsen Mobile

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New Report Says There Are More Than 13 Million Mobile Data Card Users In The U.S.

Though often thought to be the power tool of the business road warrior, wireless data cards—hardware that allows laptop and PC users to connect to the Internet over a wireless carrier's cellular network—are fast becoming a popular means of home Internet access.

Nielsen Mobile, a service of The Nielsen Company, in its first report on mobile data cards published this week, reported that there were more than 13 million wireless data card users in the US as of Q2 2008. Recent adoption has been strong, with more than half (55 percent) of these devices acquired in the past 12 months.

Often advertised as part of a carrier's mobile broadband network, such wireless data cards come in a variety of formats—ExpressCard and PCMCIA cards that slide into slots on the PC or laptop (which account for 54 percent of mobile data cards), as USB cards (30 percent) and as embedded cards that come built into laptops (17 percent). As of Q2 2008, consumers report spending an average of \$65 on their data card, excluding service costs.

And while mobile data cards are already popular with business travelers, Nielsen's research reveals that the cards are beginning to play an important role in home and personal Internet access, as well. In fact, 43 percent of mobile data card users report they most often use their data card at home, while 15 percent say they typically use the card at work. Additionally, one in five (21 percent) data card subscribers take advantage of ubiquitous access by heading outdoors and 9 percent use their card while commuting.

It's clear that data cards aren't just for business travelers but are an increasingly popular choice for in-home, personal Internet access, too, said Nic Covey, director of insights at Nielsen Mobile. "Data cards aren't just for road warriors—couch and kitchen warriors."

Still, mobile data card users aren't giving up on home Internet service providers (ISP) just yet. Of the nearly 1,300 mobile data card users Nielsen surveyed, more than 99 percent had additional means of Internet service at home. Mobile data cards typically augment high-speed home Internet access: 40 percent of card users also have cable broadband and 34 percent also have DSL in their home. That could change though, as 59 percent of mobile data card users say they might swap their ISP for data card use exclusively, giving wireless carriers one more inroad in the battle for the living room.

As carriers continue to promote mobile data cards and expand their network coverage, mobile data cards will play an increasingly important role in home Internet access, said Covey. "Consumers don't like to pay for the same thing twice and so certain segments of consumers will consider these data cards as an exchangeable alternative as speeds increase. It's the next frontier of cord cutting."