

## GADGETS

# Cellphone Headsets: Tests and Strange Look

*Sampling Yields Result  
That the Quality of Sound  
Can Be Quite Different*

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After trying out some of the new high-end cellphone headsets, I've reached this conclusion: The hardest thing about using them may be getting used to the strange looks you get from bystanders.

It is tough not to stare as buttoned-up executives make like Britney Spears, talking animatedly into their headsets as they hustle down the street. Or when perfectly sane people appear to be engaging themselves in conversation.

This sidewalk theater has a growing cast. Demand for hands-free devices is being fueled by the quest for comfort and clearer sound quality, as well as nagging fears about radiation risks. Also, new laws in New York state and other jurisdictions mandate that callers use headsets while driving.

Headset sales, while small, are increasing rapidly among the more than 135 million U.S. cellphone subscribers. According to NPDTechWorld, a market-research firm in Reston, Va., five million headsets were sold in the U.S. in the second quarter, up from 2.8 million in the third quarter of 2001, the earliest period for which it has data available.

Prices have dropped, too; over the past three years, the average retail prices were steady between \$24 and \$26, but slipped to \$21 to \$22 early this year, NPDTechWorld says. While cellphones now often come with basic headsets, many users upgrade to souped-up models, seeking more reliable sound and a better fit.

So with an eye, and an ear, toward finding the best deal in high-end headsets, I took a number of the spiffier models for a drive on the New Jersey Turnpike, and on a walk around New York's Times Square.

I chose headsets from Plantronics Inc., Santa Cruz, Calif., and Jabra Corp., a San Diego unit of Denmark's GN Netcom group, as well as one from RF Safe, a New Port Richey, Fla., company that promotes wireless products that reduce radiation emitted from cellular devices. The prices listed are the manufacturers' suggested list prices.

Overall, I found them easy to use once



MX-100 is one solution for those who want a lightweight and small headset. It consists of a C-shaped unit with an ear pad on one end and a plastic ring that tucks around the ear lobe. The microphone is positioned about one-quarter of the way down the cord and hung near my chin.

This headset worked very well for me—the sound was great even as I moved around, except for one instance when I turned my head farther away from the microphone.

For the fashion-conscious, the MX-100 includes three covers for the ear piece—in shimmering shades of blue and grey—that can be snapped on for different looks. And Mr. Eisner says the ear piece can be positioned anywhere on the ear to accommodate earrings.

The RF Safe RadFree headset (\$32.99): Just as lightweight as the MX-100, the RadFree headset consists of an ear piece that tucks inside the ear, and a microphone on a 6-inch plastic piece. The unit is intended to reduce radiation traveling to the head by keeping the cord away from your ear.

The RF Safe model also has a neon on/off button that, when pushed, automatically calls the most recently dialed number. This could be nice, particularly when trying to keep an eye on the road.

Jabra's EarBoom Winder (\$34.99): The EarBoom Winder features an ear gel with a mini-boom microphone that extends to the middle of the cheek. The cord winds inside a little plastic box that hooks on to a belt or purse. It was definitely one of the more conspicuous headsets I tried.

But fashion issues aside, the retractable-cord headset was actually the easiest to use, and the best for tucking into my backpack and pulling it out quickly without getting the cord all tangled. Jabra also makes a version of the EarBoom without the winder, which at \$24 is the brand's top-selling model this year.

I got the hang of them, but sound quality varied dramatically. There are two basic styles of headsets—some fit inside the ear with a small microphone, while others hang over the ear and tend to have a bigger microphone. In-the-ear styles were the most comfortable, produced the most secure fit and allowed me to hear the incoming sound better. But friends and family often remarked that I sounded like I was standing in a wind tunnel or talking into a tin can when using one of these models. For their part, the over-the-ear styles produced better outgoing sounds, but were bulkier and more conspicuous.

**Jabra's EarSet (\$39.99):** The smallest headset I tested, the EarSet's microphone is connected to an "ear gel"—a rubbery ear piece that is supposed to fit snugly in the ear. Jabra offers right and left ear molds, and three different sizes, but I had trouble finding one that fit comfortably.

The microphone is up near the ear, and the sound was among the most disappointing. During my walking tour of Times Square, it was the only microphone that picked up some of the loud street noise, and to callers I often sounded like I was talking under water.

Jabra's vice president of marketing, Jennifer Cauble, said the distance of the microphone to the mouth doesn't make a difference with sound quality. Instead, she says, the problems I had stemmed from my inability to find the proper ear-gel placement, which is key to directing the microphone to the mouth.

**Plantronics' M135 (\$49.95):** This headset has a curved piece that goes over the ear and uses a boom microphone that extends toward the mouth. It produced the highest-quality outgoing sound because it doesn't pick up as much ambient noise. Nick Eisner, Plantronics' senior product manager, says that if you often use your cellphone in noisy environments, such as a trading floor or a convertible automobile, having a boom microphone is a necessity. Also, unlike other headsets, the M135 includes a volume-control knob and a mute button.

On the other hand, these headsets are relatively heavy and don't stay in place quite as well as those that go in the ear. Also, these headsets are less than discreet, and of the models I tested, the M135 made me feel most like a wannabe pop star.

**Plantronics' MX-100 (\$39.95):** The

## —The Mossberg Solution—

Walter S. Mossberg is on vacation. The Mossberg Solution column will return on Sept 18.