

# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

*Video telephony gives the deaf community something to smile about.*

*By Mark Caldwell*



For those of us who can hear, talking on the telephone seems like the most natural thing to do. But imagine living in a world without sound.

We would not be able to hear the phone ring, and even if we did pick it up we couldn't communicate. For deaf people, this has been a problem since the telephone was invented.

For the first time, however, those with hearing difficulties are queuing up to buy mobile video phones provided by 3 for the simple reason that the company deploys 3G technology that brings a whole new visual dimension to telecommunications.

Thanks to the video capabilities of 3, deaf people are now able to converse in a dialect they understand – sign language – and they

are giving it a big thumbs up in Europe.

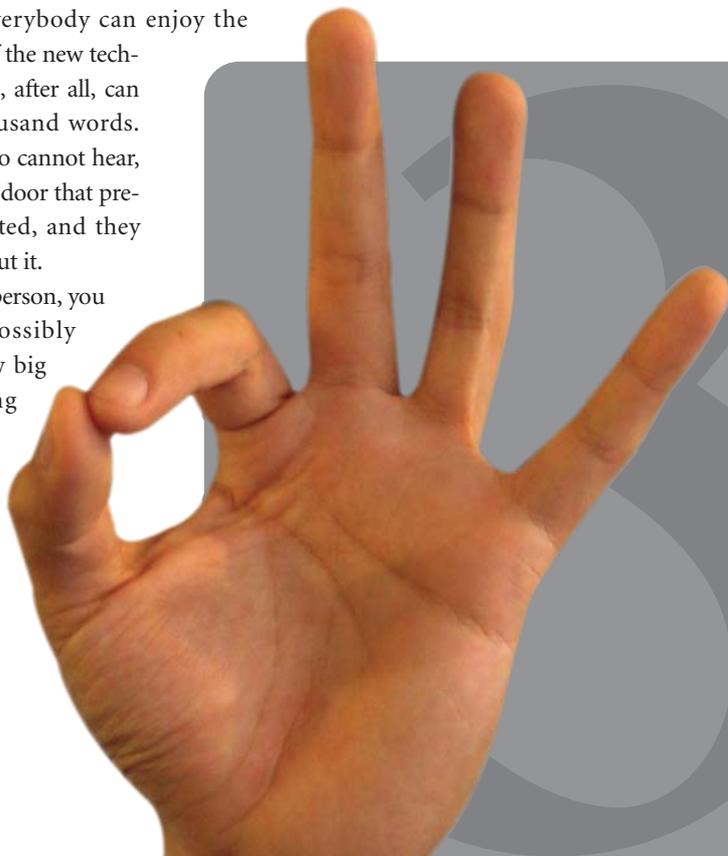
Previously, deaf people had benefited to some degree from SMS messaging, but the written language is not the common means of communication and never really caught on. Sign language, on the other hand, uses hands, eyes, mimicry and gesticulation, so video telephony enables deaf people to communicate in real time – to see and be seen as if in person.

Of course, everybody can enjoy the visual element of the new technology – a smile, after all, can be worth a thousand words. But for those who cannot hear, 3 has unlocked a door that previously was bolted, and they are euphoric about it.

“As a hearing person, you could not possibly understand how big 3G is among the deaf,” says Helena Fremnell Ståhl, Information

Manager at *Sveriges Dövas Riksförbund* (SDR), the Swedish National Association of the Deaf.

3 has revolutionised Andy Lundberg's life. “Suddenly I feel free,” the 37-year-old told local media in Sweden. “I was hesitant about 3 at the start, but as more and more people subscribed, I understood that it would not be possible to be without one. It is a milestone that has been passed



for all deaf people.”

Fellow subscriber Hans Smedberg concurred: “3 didn’t realise what they did when they gave us the opportunity of unlimited phone calls. We talk all the time. It feels like a gift from above.”

The enthusiasm amongst this niche market came as a pleasant surprise to the company, which began operations in Sweden in May 2003. There are about 10,000 deaf or hearing-impaired people in Sweden, and by September this year 4,000 of them had already purchased a 3 video mobile phone. Extrapolate that for their surrounding family, friends and other points of contact, and the community can be multiplied tenfold.

“The trend happened almost by accident,” confirms Elisabeth Lennhede, Head of PR at Hi3G Access, which operates the 3 brand in Sweden. “It started in the town of Örebro, about 200km south of Stockholm, which has a big deaf community with special schools and so on. By coincidence the staff in our 3Store knew sign language and were able to explain to people how to make video calls. Before long, the take-up rate among the deaf community exploded in all of Sweden.”

The local media also took notice, with extensive coverage in newspapers and on TV, and subscriptions snowballed further.

“There is enormous emotional

impact and value,” Lennhede adds. “Recently, a deaf mother described being able to call her child for the first time. She had tears in her eyes. It has made a huge difference to them.”

Thus far, the favourite handset model among the deaf community has been the *NEC 616*, due to its high-quality video capability.

Realising the potential to not only increase subscriber numbers, but also to really change lives for the better, 3 Sweden, in collaboration with the SDR, is looking at ways to improve and extend its services. Already, its website has a page that uses sign language to

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inform deaf people about 3 (see: <http://www.tre.se/tecken>). Other initiatives are under consideration.

Meanwhile, a new project led by the National Post and Telecom Agency, in cooperation with SDR, is looking at ways for the deaf community to be able to call emergency services.

The message is also spreading fast in other countries where 3 operates.

In Denmark, where the deaf

community numbers around 5,000, about half have already signed up with 3, according to Mika Lassen, Communications Manager of H3G Denmark.

“A month or two after we launched, the Danish Deaf Society made a TV programme about how useful the new service is to the deaf community,” she recalls. “They said: ‘This is the best technology that has been developed in 50 years.’ At last they could communicate in their first language over long distances. We realised that while people were having great fun with video telephony, it could also be very, very useful.”

3 Denmark has been working with the deaf community to identify areas where services can be enhanced. The company also aims to find staff who are fluent in sign language to work in its 3Stores.

In Austria, where 3 has been in operation since May 2003, the company has introduced the 3Visual tariff package in cooperation with WITAF (Vienna Deaf and Dumb Care Society) based on the needs of deaf consumers with an emphasis on video telephony. To help improve services, 3 provided WITAF with 20 handsets to test, receiving practical advice and input from deaf users.

One groundbreaking development to emerge has been the introduction of an interactive mobile sign dictionary that contains about 1,700 signs. Called “Art and Culture – Virtual Frame,” the project was initiated by 3 together with the Institute for Media Art and Science Transfer. Signs were specially developed and short videos produced that provide the most important signs in a simple form. The sign language dictionary can be built interactively by continuously adding words and signs while ready-made video clips can also be sent in a video message format.

More innovations will surely follow.

It’s still early days, but everybody is talking about it, and deaf communities have already come to appreciate that 3 is a company that really listens. 

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