



Ten O'Clock Tech

Smile, The Videophone's Ringing

Arik Hesseldahl, 08.20.02, 10:00 AM ET

What ever happened to the videophone?

The Jetsons had them. They also showed up in science-fiction movies like *Blade Runner* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. And while they're certainly available on the market, chances are you'll have a hard time thinking of anyone you know who owns one.

Despite there being little technical impediment to installing a videophone line over most conventional home phone lines, there doesn't seem to be much demand for them. Maybe it simply hasn't been offered in a way that gets consumers interested. Perhaps **Vialta's** Beamer will change that.

Described as a phone video station, or PVS, the Beamer adds color video capability to phone calls. It's compatible with any home phone and works over standard analog phone lines--adding no additional cost to a regular phone call.

The unit is easy enough to operate. Plug the phone line into the Beamer and then connect it to the telephone. When you're ready to start a video call, call up another Beamer user and hit the "start" button. Once the other party presses their button, the video call starts up.

The Beamer also has a snapshot feature that allows for displaying single still images instead of a live moving image. If you'd rather the other party not see what's going on, you can hide behind that still image as long as the call goes through.



Vialta's Beamer phone video station

Three viewing options let you see yourself, the other party or both at the same time on the display screen.

An easy target market for something like this is families with kids. New grandparents would pay to see their grandchildren over the phone. The company plans to roll the product out this month through consumer electronics retailers like **Best Buy** (nyse: [BBY](#) - news - people) and **Fry's**. They'll sell for about \$500 a pair or \$300 for a single unit. But the question remains: Does anyone really want to be seen over the phone?

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