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Reach out and face someone

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Carol Iversen Lee remembers seeing videophones demonstrated at Disneyland years ago, but was disappointed they never got past Fantasyland.

But this year, Lee finally got a videophone -- a Beamer Phone Video Station,

which lets Lee see and hear her infant granddaughter Sarah every day even though the two live a continent apart.

And more importantly, 7-month-old Sarah recognizes her grandmother's face, even though the Beamer's choppy video is far from TV quality.

"This product has revolutionized my life more than any other product in my lifetime," beamed Lee, an Atherton resident. "The power of being able to have your family relate to you and you relate to them just made me feel so much more connected."

I spoke to Lee using a demo Beamer provided by its maker, Vialta Inc. of Fremont. The Beamer looks like a fancy glass picture frame, except it has a 3.5-inch color LCD screen in the middle and a small built-in video camera on top.

The Beamer costs \$300 for one, \$500 for a pair. And you do need two, one on your end and one on the receiving end. They are sold at several electronics retailers.

The Beamer is designed to be as nontechnical as possible, without the computers or broadband connections that you need with a Web cam. It doesn't even have its own telephone, but plugs into a standard analog telephone line.

During one test of the product, I was able to set up a Beamer in less than two minutes at my sister-in-law Daisy Capili's home in San Bruno. When I called her later from my home phone, which also had a Beamer hooked up, I just dialed, pressed a button and the two devices automatically connected.

Within seconds, we could see each other, with our own images displayed in a picture-in-picture frame on the lower right hand corner. One button lets you send a still picture, so you can hide whatever you're doing.

"My first reaction was, 'Wow, let's hook this up and call my friend,' " Daisy wrote me later. "I guess the excitement of it was seeing another person's face on the other end."

The picture, though, is choppy and fuzzy, and a few times dissolved into big digital squares as the line quality deteriorated.

The Beamer compresses the video and moves it only 4 to 15 frames per second using a 33.6 Kbps modem built into the device. There is a control that lets you increase the video quality, but then the image is more like a slide show of still photos that change every second.

You also need to stay in front of the camera and have enough light on your face. Daisy didn't even realize the Beamer had a color display because I didn't have enough light on my face.

Yet with the proper lighting and a good phone connection, the video can be more than clear enough.

Vialta officials make no bones about the fact that the image isn't always the best. They're banking on the fact that despite many decades of promise, nobody else has come up with a relatively inexpensive, easy-to-use videophone for the average home consumer.

Aiptek Inc. makes a similarly designed device called the HyperVPhone 2000C, priced at \$550 each.

The Beamer is supposed to work with equipment like the HyperVPhone that uses the same video conferencing standard, called H.324.

The Beamer's not worth the cost or effort if you're talking to someone in the next town. But it could be if you're carrying on a long-distance romance, trying to keep in touch with distant relatives or if you want to talk to your kids on a long business trip.

Take Lee, former owner of a software firm, who is thrilled to follow the progress of her granddaughter in New York City.

"When I got the Beamer, I was watching her in her new high chair and was able to see the outfit that I sent her," said Lee, who has no financial ties to Vialta.

Lee loves to see the "ordinary things" she could otherwise only see in person. Last week, for example, she said, "I could see her eating Cheerios, that she had learned to wave, and she had a little cold because she was rubbing her ear.

"It's not perfect, but you know what? It's perfect to me."

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