Ringtones call hardware tune
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RINGTONES are driving future hardware developments in mobile phones while users continue to demand increasingly complex personalisation options. The ringtone business is worth $US5 billion ($6.7 billion) a year, Vodafone marketing manager Graham Christie says.

"We used to offer tones based on the features of the handsets of the day, but now the demand is so high, phone manufacturers are trying to include as many functions as possible in new releases.

"It's very hard to resist personalising your phone, and ringtones make that easy," he says.

Ringtones retain the top spot in mobile content downloads, followed by wallpapers, logos and games.

News and information bring up the rear, with weather reports rising in popularity.

"Our ringtones business here in Australia has a turnover equivalent to a medium-sized chain of record stores," Christie says.

The top 10 downloaded ringtones are usually mobile versions of popular music, including Delta Goodrem's Out of the Blue and Spiderbait's cover of Black Betty.

Ringtones fit into three bands: monophonic, polyphonic and the newer True Tones.

Monophonic tones are beeps made to sound like a popular song.

Polyphonic tones sound like a cheap synthesised version of a tune.

True Tones uses compression technology to provide sound quality similar to an MP3.

Optus mobile marketing director Stuart Tucker says polyphonic ringtones account for 70 per cent of Optus Zoo's downloads.

"It's about having your own personality," Tucker says.

"In a busy world we need more outlets than fashion and hairstyles, and ringtones scratch that itch."

He expects True Tones to take off over Christmas, with the release of low-cost handsets that support the technology. "Optus will have the Motorola C650 available for $199, and handsets like this will boost the uptake of True Tones," he says.

Until then, polyphonic tones will remain the most sophisticated.

"We find the top 10 downloads reflect the top 10 music charts quite closely," Christie says.

Vodafone has global licences with music labels to provide ringtone versions of the latest tracks.
"We can't prove that the ringtone top 10 has an effect on the music top 10, but it seems reasonable to assume there is a reciprocal effect," Christie says.

"At the very least, a popular ringtone might keep the song in the charts for a week or two longer."

While the main carriers are waiting for True Tones to further excite the market, third-generation network carrier 3 says True Tones are old-hat.

"3 launched technology superior to True Tones in September, with the arrival of Real Tones," 3 stakeholder relations director Steve Wright says.

Real Tones offer more choice, and better sound reproduction, he says.

Unlike other carriers, 3's ringtone top 10 is not dominated by popular music but by impersonator tones.

These tones use voice clips imitating stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jack Nicholson.

The clips parody popular films such as A Few Good Men, changing the script. "Have you got what it takes to answer this call?" the Nicholson impersonator asks in one.

Other categories include Naughty, Off-The-Wall and Sound FX.

Also, 3 is working on a technology called Caller Tones, which let a caller hear anything from music to impersonators while waiting for an answer.

Beyond ringtones, mobile providers are developing support for custom images, and even video, to appear when a mobile rings.

"Wallpapers are second in popularity only to ringtones, so it's a logical step to look at caller video clips," Christie says.

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