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The Guru of Gadgets

Richard Siber, head of Andersen's wireless practice, walks the walk. ■ BY DANIEL MCGINN

If Richard Siber's career had unfolded according to plan, he'd loathe his pager. For years Siber dreamed of becoming a pediatrician. He studied psychobiology at Boston University and then took a job as a researcher at the Boston Biomedical Research Institute. He was well on his way to a lifetime of being beeped after midnight by frantic parents when he first heard about a different kind of cellular science. After much deliberation, he told his family he was foregoing medical school to take a job selling mobile phones. His explanation: "This could be my future."

Today, 39-year-old Siber is a partner at Andersen Consulting and one of the world's leading prognosticators on all things wireless. From his New England base he travels the globe, schmoozing with industry leaders and spreading his vision of the day when most Web users will surf sans wires. "Wireless is going to be the single biggest event" in computing, he says, citing one prediction that wireless transactions will account for \$83 billion in 2003. "I could spend three hours



MR. WIRELESS: Siber carries seven phones and pagers on the road. The monthly bills run as high as \$750.

talking about that." To non-techies that might sound like a threat. But in the wireless industry, lots of people pay good money to hear Siber hold forth. Says Thomas Wheeler, president and CEO of the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association, "Richard Siber is the guru of wireless."

That expertise comes from growing up with the industry. In 1985, when Siber quit his biomedical research job to become a cell phone salesman, Boston's first cell phone network had just gone live, phones cost \$3,600 and air-time ran 75 cents per minute. So selling required a little creativity. At one client site, a nuclear power plant where workers routinely had to descend into a dangerously high-voltage substation to take readings, Siber jury-rigged a gizmo combining a car battery, a Mac and a bulky old Oki phone to save them the trip.

In 1990, after earning an MBA at night school, he moved into consulting. At his first job, he produced monthly white papers explaining and predicting industry trends.

That's where he made the then far-fetched forecast that AT&T would buy McCaw Cellular — a prediction that came true in 1996. In another, he described the growing problem of "churn," in which consumers hop from one cellular service to another in search of better rates, wreaking havoc on cell providers' bottom lines. It's an issue

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that's still critical as the industry matures. "When you're growing at 50 or 100 percent a year, you don't care [if customers defect]," he says. "But now that it's more competitive, and TheStreet measures CEO performance on certain matrices, churn being one of them, it's a very big deal."

In 1994 Siber jumped to Andersen. "I was brought in to jump-start the firm's thinking about wireless," he says. At the time, Andersen's wireless practice brought in \$18 million annually; today it bills more than \$500 million. Siber and his team provide soup-to-nuts service, consulting on everything from distribution – should a wireless provider have storefronts? – to compensation. For Sprint PCS, Andersen conducts product testing and runs its help desk.

Siber is also involved in Andersen's internal brainstorming about new wireless applications. Over breakfast in a suburban Boston diner, he talks of the day when wireless devices will alert users to local restaurants offering their favorite specials. Andersen consultants spend time dreaming up all sorts of new wireless business opportunities like that, hoping (if those dreams ever come true) to get a small slice of every transaction. It's a departure from the fee-based client work that consultants have long depended on, and a sign of how the Net and the wireless revolution are changing consulting.

Siber endures a grueling travel schedule for work. Consider one typical week this summer: On Monday he flew from Boston to Philadelphia, then drove to Atlantic City to give a speech to 180 Andersen colleagues. Flying to Atlanta

that night, he was diverted to South Carolina by a storm. He made it to Atlanta on Tuesday morning for meetings, then caught the beginning of baseball's All-Star Game, leaving in the fourth inning for a dinner meeting. On Wednesday he was back in suburban Boston, talking to execs from a bunch of startups about Andersen's small-business incubation services (Siber says he now spends 20 percent of his time working with new wireless companies). Thursday he met with another startup in New York, and on Friday he hosted a roundtable for chief executives of 23 companies, among them Cisco Systems' CEO John Chambers. When more bad weather delayed flights back to Boston, he rented a car with three strangers. "It was like [the movie] *Road Trip*," Siber says. "They could have been ax murderers." But he was home by 2 a.m. and, after responding to e-mail, ready for his weekend.

To stay in touch with colleagues and family while he's on the road, Siber usually carries several of his seven wireless phones. As we eat breakfast, he shows me his Motorola Triband handset, punching a couple of buttons to show how it can be used all over Europe. He also carries a Nokia handset that connects via AT&T, and a Sprint phone that he uses to access the Web. (It's impolitic to walk into a client's office using a rival's phone.) Altogether he spends more than 5,000 minutes a month

on his wireless phones; add in the bill for his pagers and the monthly fees top \$750. All those gizmos could wreak havoc on one's home life – he's married with two young children – but he makes a point of turning off his phones when he's not working, and he doesn't list his cell phone or pager numbers on his business card.

As we talk, he fishes out a photograph of his daughter Bailey at age 2. She's playing with a cordless phone while typing on a laptop computer. Siber sometimes describes his work as

RICHARD SIBER'S WIRED VISION

1. Wireless Web phones providing Internet access will eclipse the entire installed base of PCs providing Net access within four years. **2. Mobile commerce will generate \$140 billion (U.S.) in 2004.** **3. Controlling subscriber, handset and employee churn is vital to success for wireless companies.** **4. Portals are key – for corporations, employee portals (desktop on handset, intranet access); for consumers, voice portals (information exchange, location services, mobile commerce).** **5. Look outside! There are lessons to be learned from outside the United States, where prepaid services, mobile banking and other entertainment services are already in use.**

evangelism, but as a generation that's been raised on wireless comes to maturity, this field seems sure to grow without anyone playing the role of cheerleader. How big can it get? "Whatever number you say will be wrong," he says. "Whatever I or anyone else says, it's going to be bigger than that." ■

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