

Look Who's on the Telephone!

The latest videophone looks great and is easy to set up. Will it succeed where all the rest have failed? **By Anita Hamilton**

EVER WONDER WHETHER the pals you call up every now and then just to chat are really paying attention to your tired little tales? They may say “ya” and “uh-huh” at all the right intervals, but do you ever get the sneaking suspicion that they're more interested in the dishes they're doing while you're yapping away or the football game they've tactfully muted as you drone on and on?

If only you could see the look on their face, then you'd be able to tell the real friends from the merely polite listeners. A video telephone is the obvious solution, but while many companies, including such consumer-electronics giants as AT&T and Panasonic, have tried to create a videophone that people would actually buy, they've all failed miserably. The products were too expensive or too complicated, or they just didn't work well enough.

So why should the Beamer, from newcomer Vialta in Fremont, Calif., fare any better? For starters, it has a stylish design that looks more like a picture frame than another high-tech gizmo. What's more, it plugs directly into a regular phone line and requires no computer hookup.

And at \$500 for a pair (both parties need one so they can see each other), it comes at a pretty fair price.

Of course, you could buy a pair of webcams for less than \$100 that will let you do the same thing over your Mac or PC, but who wants to sit in front of a computer any

Designed in-house at Vialta, the Beamer neatly houses a 3½-in. color screen in a silvery frame with a clear plastic faceplate. A small camera is perched just above the screen, and the entire unit is 8 in. tall, 6 in. wide and 4 in. deep—small enough to fit on a shelf or ledge. The few controls, including one for brightness and image quality, are tucked away on one side.

More important, the Beamer is probably the easiest high-tech gizmo you'll ever set up. After recruiting my friend Swati as a guinea pig and promising her that setting the Beamer up in her apartment would take no more than an hour, I was amazed when we finished in less than 10 minutes. All we had to do was take it out of the box, plug one cable to the phone jack, a second to the phone and a third to the power outlet.

After whizzing through the same setup back at my pad, I placed the first call using my home phone. Once Swati picked up, I pushed a button on my Beamer to start the video feed. In about 15 seconds (during

which we couldn't speak to each other), up popped Swati's pretty face. Well, she actually looks much better in person, but because the lighting was bad in her apartment, Swati's face was covered in shadows. Mine came through clear and bright on her end.

The video, about 176 by 144 dots per inch, was a little fuzzy, but it was still fun seeing my pal as we talked about what we did over the weekend. One cool feature is a button labeled **DETAIL/MOTION** that let us opt for a clearer picture that got refreshed less frequently or a more fluid one that got a lot more blurry. We both opted for detail but noticed a time lag between our movements and their appearance onscreen. We liked the picture-in-picture feature that let each of us see what we looked like in a small image in the corner of our own screen.

The most annoying part of our experiment in video telephony was when the sound suddenly cut out. Because voice and video get crammed down the same thin phone line by the Beamer's built-in modem and compression software, our words at times came through garbled or not at all—like a bad cell-phone connection. But generally the sound worked fine and the video was good enough. When I showed Swati a couple of new outfits I had purchased, she could see that my shirt was maroon and my shorts were black.

Watching someone while you're talking takes some getting used to, however. I was tempted to start watering my plants, but I didn't dare stray from the camera. And if Swati was bored by my chatter, she did a great job of feigning interest. That's what I call a real friend. ■

