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Desert Ridge goes Wi-Fi

Shoppers can get connected anywhere in center

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NORTHEAST VALLEY - Next time you're near AMC Theatres at Desert Ridge Marketplace you might pick up a new signal on your PDA or laptop.

The 320,000-square-foot, open-air shopping mall now offers free Wi-Fi Internet connections, a first for any major shopping center serving northeast Valley residents.

"There are folks that will bring their computer everywhere as an extension of their personality. They feel the need to be in touch and have access everywhere they go," said Patrice Duker of the International Council of Shopping Centers. "It's smart business to be able to reach consumers in a variety of ways."

There are at least 20 other free, smaller Wi-Fi hot spots at coffee shops, hotels and public libraries within Scottsdale, reports Anchor Free, a Web site that tracks free hot spots nationwide. But none is as big as Desert Ridge.

Lauren Maurer of Scottsdale met with friends last week at Desert Ridge. When the graphic designer learned of the new Wi-Fi service, she couldn't wait to check it out.

"On a day like today, I might come out here to work," Maurer said.

Another Desert Ridge shopper, Paula Daniels, was pleasantly surprised to learn of the new Wi-Fi service.

Daniels, who subscribes to a T-Mobile wireless service, couldn't log into her paid service on a laptop outside the Paradise Bakery. But after learning about the Desert Ridge service, Daniels connected right away.

"I think that's awesome," Daniels said.

Testing the Desert Ridge signal, Daniels talked with friends while her 4-year-old son, Jared, remained entertained on the Disney game site.

"I always need to go to a Starbucks to use it," she said of past attempts to log on during visits to the mall. "It would be nice to come here and not go to a Starbucks."

Starbucks store manager Ryan Booher doesn't think the district's free Wi-Fi service will affect his business. The national coffee chain offers a T-Mobile Wi-Fi hot spot, in which customers subscribe to the service.

Booher's store, which keeps a steady hum of customers, faces a large public seating area with an outdoor fireplace that fills up in the afternoons.

"I think it's nice because more people can come here," said Booher, adding that those who don't have a T-Mobile account can still get Internet access through the shopping center's new Wi-Fi service.

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The Desert Ridge wireless service, provided through Cox Communications, was activated in October and tested to ensure the Wi-Fi signals were strong in designated areas, said Sarah Schneider, marketing director at Desert Ridge Marketplace.

High-tech shoppers could soon use the new service to navigate where to shop, she said.

"At this time we don't have specific plans to roll out any promotions. But as a center and innovative developer, we will continue to look at ways to enhance the experience for shoppers," Schneider said.

"I imagine we will explore additional ways to use the Wi-Fi system to improve the way the customers may communicate with the center and our merchants promotionally," she said.

Desert Ridge joins a growing number of lifestyle shopping centers and malls that offer wireless service to lure high-tech shoppers.

Vestar, a retail and real estate developer that operates Desert Ridge, plans to expand the service to its shopping centers at Tempe Marketplace and the Tustin Legacy in Tustin, Calif.

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