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Cell phone gadget wins local award

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Poor cell phone reception, particularly in homes, is becoming the bane of more mobile phone users now that video and other high-speed data services are available on the newest high-tech devices.

A small San Diego company, Nextivity, has an answer for that.

The company has developed an easy-to-install device that boosts wireless coverage inside buildings. Nextivity, which has garnered \$17 million in venture funding, sells its boxes to cell phone carriers to ward off customers departing because of poor service.

The 45-employee Rancho Bernardo company won in the Emerging Growth category yesterday at the annual AeA technology awards. More than 600 people attended the luncheon at the Torrey Pines Hilton, organized by the San Diego chapter of the trade group formerly called the American Electronics Association.

The event showcases technology companies that tend to fly under the radar. Nextivity, for example, is just two years old and won't officially launch its product until next year.

But Nextivity is working with 28 cell phone carriers worldwide. The company envisions that the wireless companies would provide the devices free to subscribers.

While cell phone users might tolerate poor voice reception indoors, they are less likely to look the other way when surfing the Internet or streaming video to mobile devices, the company says.

Nextivity landed in San Diego because its founder, Behzad Mohebbi, worked for Texas Instruments locally and because it could find workers in the region with expertise in radio frequency chips.

"There are very few places in the world where you can get the skill set you need all in one area," said Michael Lotter, Nextivity's vice president of engineering.

Judges in the AeA awards program picked winners in nine categories. Companies were chosen for innovative technology, market reach, corporate citizenship and achievement of internal benchmarks.

The companies range from Internet firms to hardware makers.

For the second time, AeA gave an award for clean technology. It went to ISE Corp., a 150-employee Poway firm that makes hybrid, hydrogen, electric and diesel systems for transit buses.

San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders, who presented the clean tech award, said the industry is important to the region. There are about 170 clean tech firms operating countywide.

"We see this as another cluster in our economy so we weather these economic downturns better than other parts of the country," Sanders said.

The winners, by industry, are followed by the finalists:

* Software -- ID Analytics, Blackball, MadCap Software, MaintenanceNet, World Technologies Research.

* Internet commerce -- Breach Security, Eventful, Adicio, ProQuo, Online Guru.

- * Computers and related products -- H2O Audio, Astute Networks, Skinit, Nirvanix, Xenonics Holdings.
 - * Communications -- Networkfleet, Intercasting, Ethertronics, Ortiva Wireless.
 - * Information technology -- Kratos Defense, SGIS, Dataskill, DefenseWeb Technologies, InterKnowlogy.
 - * Semiconductors -- Vektrex, Entropic Communications, SenseLabs Technology.
 - * Medical devices -- Alphatec Spine, Cytori Therapeutics, Digirad, IntelliDot Corp.
 - * Emerging growth -- Nextivity, Anakam, J5 Systems, PowerMetal Technologies, Retail Inkjet Solutions.
 - * Clean tech -- ISE Corp., 3E Co., Enviance, **Open Energy** Corp., Verari Systems
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