

Audience has Google's ear with anti-noise technology

BY JONATHAN XAVIER

MOUNTAIN VIEW – Google Inc.'s Nexus One phone may be able to take pictures, play high-definition video, surf the Web, and run games and applications. But thanks to Audience Inc., one of its more talked-about features is decidedly old school: making phone calls.

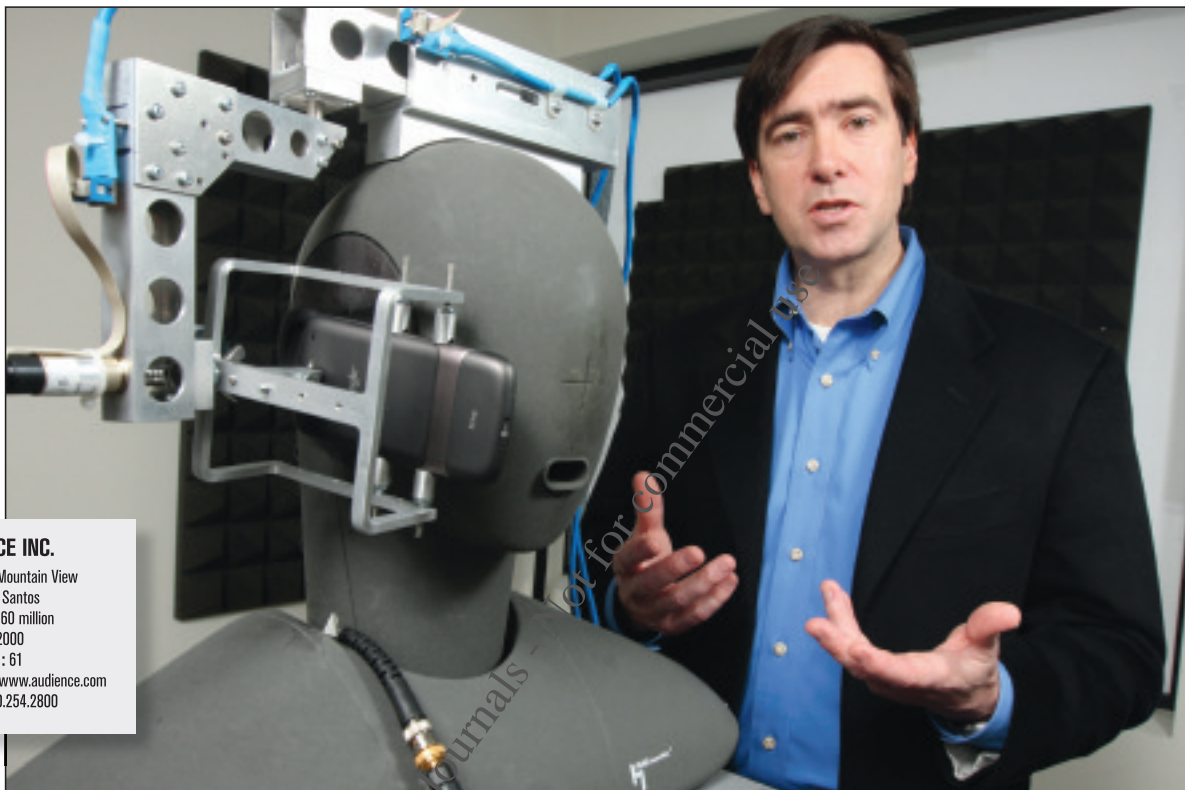
Audience aims to make calls sound clearer on the Nexus One with its A1026 voice processor. The processor is a chip that uses the next generation of noise suppressor, blocking background sounds that might otherwise drown out the conversation.

Audience's sound suppression techniques work like the human hearing system, using two speakers in the same way listeners use their left and right ears to determine the source of sounds. It is also able to separate the pitch of a speaker's voice from background noise.

The chip's presence on Google's phone marks Audience's first move into the West in a big way after being available in Asia for some time. The company said this is just the start as it will also make chips for a number of AT&T Inc. phones.

Audience is venture-backed, with \$60 million in four rounds of funding from New Enterprise Associates, Tallwood Venture Capital, Vulcan Capital and VentureTech Alliance. The most recent round came in March 2009. CEO Peter Santos declined to disclose exact revenue, but he said it is between \$5 million and \$10 million.

Capturing the U.S. market will present some challenges for the company, said Will Strauss, founder of Forward Concepts, a market research firm that covers the cell phone market. Strauss pointed out that, unlike some noise suppressors offered by other companies,



AUDIENCE INC.

Location: Mountain View
CEO: Peter Santos
Funding: \$60 million
Founded: 2000
Employees: 61
Web site: www.audience.com
Phone: 650.254.2800

HEAR WHAT I HEAR: CEO Peter Santos said his company's technology adapts techniques that human hearing uses to block out background noise.

VICKI THOMPSON

Audience's chip is hardware-based. That means it adds a slight manufacturing cost to each handset.

It's not a game-breaking amount, but it means the company will have to persuade handset makers that it's worth the cost. It may limit it to the higher-end phones that consumers are willing to pay more for, a smaller part of the wider cell phone market, he said.

"We look at that phone, and we say it's a business phone," Strauss said. "And those are the people who will pay more for noise canceling — effective noise canceling, I should say. Because everyone says they have noise canceling, but this is the only one I've found that works."

Erick Tseng, senior product manager at Google, said the company evaluated a number of technologies for use on the Nexus One but found Audience's unique and effective.

"We were impressed with their innovations around noise cancellation, and we were excited about the user benefits that could be unlocked by combining Audience technology with Google's speech-based applications," Tseng said.

And speech-based applications aren't limited to phones, Santos said. He noted that because the Audience system makes use of processing power to selectively tune out noise, it gets better the more processing power it has available. That

makes it scaleable to situations where a speaker isn't talking directly into a microphone, such as speakerphones, Internet telephony services such as Skype, or audio capture for movies.

With processors getting increasingly powerful, and network bandwidth getting increasingly large, Santos said that he believes the next innovations in IT are going to be around interface — how people interact with their machines. That's a revolution Audience is well positioned to take part in, he said.

"We're not alone in tackling this problem, but it's a very rich area of innovation. And I think Google sees that too," Santos said.

Many downsizing survivors aren't all that 'happy they have a job'

"Top Talent — Keeping Performance Up When Business is Down" by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Harvard Business Press, \$18.

Author Sylvia Ann Hewlett's Hidden Brain Drain research shows that survivors of layoffs suffer from "Downsizing Syndrome." While management believes many survivors are happy because they still have jobs, the opposite is true. Even in a tough job market, Hewlett found that 84 percent of the women and 40 percent of the men were considering bolting.

Why? Survivors think a downsized organization, especially one that also

slashed its training and development budget, downsized their career paths, too. Their workload will increase, as will the pressure to meet deadlines. Doing more with less inevitably leads to longer hours and a tilt in work/life balance. No wonder over 60 percent described themselves as demoralized, paralyzed and demotivated.

Who's to blame for creating an environment where such thinking festers? Management. Its failure to consider the reaction of survivors is an ironic misstep. It kept the essential people, yet most of them don't feel essential.

Hewlett shows that two-way communication minimizes Downsizing Syndrome. Keep people informed of the good and bad news. Let them voice their concerns

and take actions that show management listens. Empathy and related actions increase morale and productivity.

Manager as mentor comes to the forefront of action. Emphasize thrive, not survive. Smaller and fewer teams offer more career-growth options. They create opportunities for stretch assignments and cross-functional roles. The managers must help survivors grow into expanded roles.

Employing non-monetary rewards increases buy-in, too. Personalizing a



"thank you," especially in front of an employee's peers, speaks appreciation for all. Use time as currency, too. Organize work schedules around the outside-of-work commitments of the team. Flex schedules show your concern for life/work balance, as does working from home and encouraging employees to become community volunteers on company time.

Hewlett also addresses how to introduce restructuring plans so employees know they're trailbreakers creating the future, not survivors of the past.

JIM PAWLAK is a freelance writer.