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# History of Pagers and Beepers

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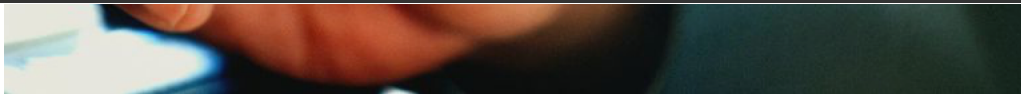
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**By Mary Bellis**

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Long before email and texting, there were pagers, portable mini radiofrequency devices that allowed for instant human interaction. Invented in 1921, pagers—or "beepers" as they are also known—reached their heyday in the 1980s and 1990s. To have one hanging from a belt loop, shirt pocket, or purse strap was to convey a certain kind of status—that of a person important enough to be reached at a moment's notice. Like today's emoji-savvy texters, pager users eventually developed their own form of shorthand communications.

## The First Pagers

The first pager-like system was put into use by the Detroit Police Department in 1921. However, it was not until 1949 that the very first telephone pager was patented. The inventor's name was Al Gross, and his pagers were first used in New York City's Jewish Hospital. Gross' pager was not a consumer device available to everyone. In fact, the Federal Communications Commission did not approve the pager for public use until 1958. The technology was for many years reserved strictly for critical

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communications between emergency responders like police officers, firefighters, and medical professionals.

Motorola Corners the Market

In 1959, Motorola produced a personal radio communications product that it called a pager. The device, about half the size of a deck of cards, contained a small receiver that delivered a radio message individually to those also carrying a pager. The first successful consumer pager was Motorola's Pageboy I, introduced in 1964. It had no display and could not store messages, but it was portable and it notified the wearer by the tone what action they should take.

There were 3.2 million pager users worldwide at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> At that time pagers had a limited range and were used mostly in on-site situations—for example, when medical workers needed to communicate with each other within a hospital. At this point, Motorola was also producing devices with alphanumeric displays, which allowed users to receive and send a message through a digital network.

A decade later, wide-area paging had been invented, and by 1994, there were over 61 million in use, and pagers became popular for personal communications as well.<sup>1</sup> Now, pager users could send any number of messages, from "I Love You" to "Goodnight," all using a set of numbers and asterisks.

How Pagers Work

The paging system is not only simple, but it's also reliable. One person sends a message using a touch-tone telephone or even an email, which in turn is forwarded to the pager of the person they want to talk to. That person is notified that a message is incoming, either by an audible beep or by vibration. The incoming phone number or text message is then displayed on the pager's LCD screen.

Heading for Extinction?

While Motorola stopped producing pagers in 2001, they are still being manufactured. Spok is one company that provides a variety of paging services, including one-way, two-way, and encrypted. Indeed, there are an estimated 2 million pagers in use today, as of early 2021.<sup>2</sup> That's because even today's smartphone technologies can't compete with the reliability of the paging network. A cellphone is only as good as the cellular or Wi-Fi network off of which it operates, so even the best networks still have dead zones and poor in-building coverage. Pagers also instantly deliver messages to multiple people at the exact same time—no lags in delivery, which is critical when minutes, even seconds, count in an emergency. Finally, cellular networks quickly become overloaded during disasters. This doesn't happen with paging networks.

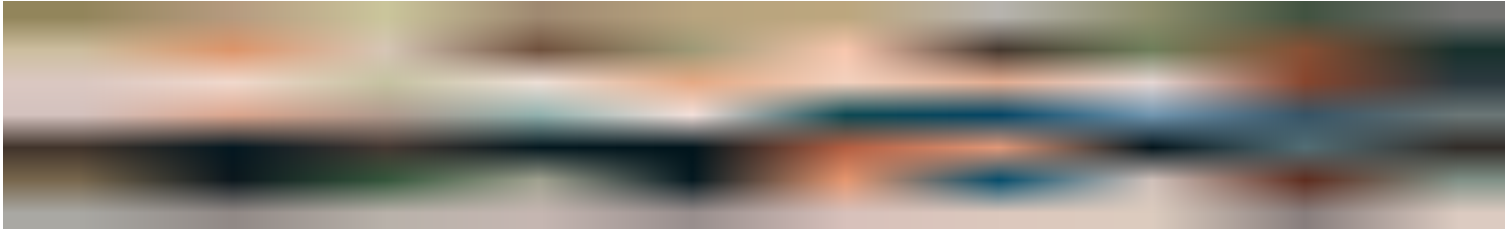
So until cellular networks become just as reliable, the little "beeper" that hangs from a belt remains the best form of communication for those working in the critical communications fields.

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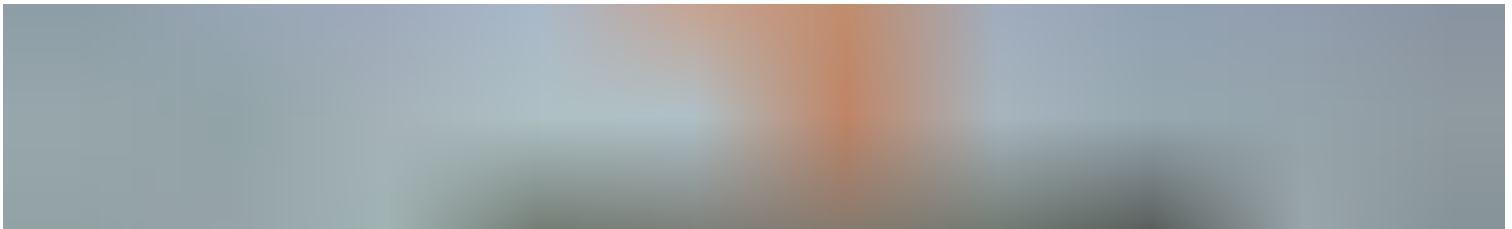
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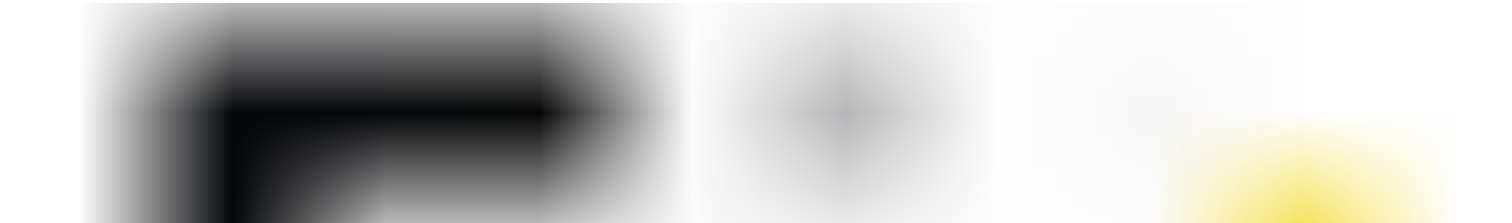
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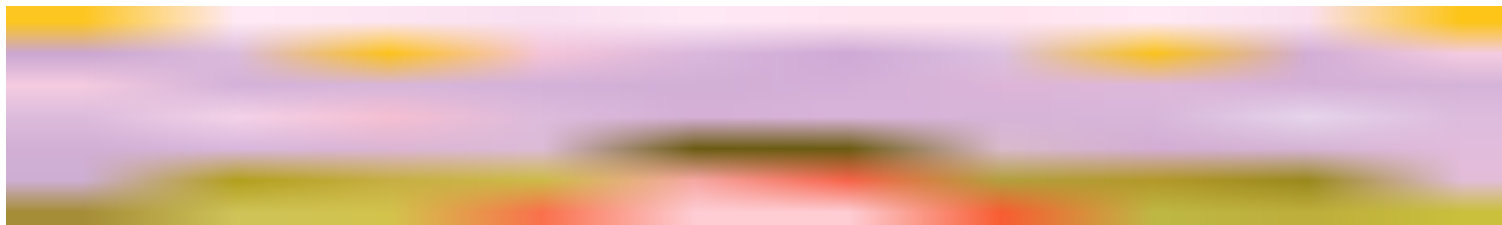


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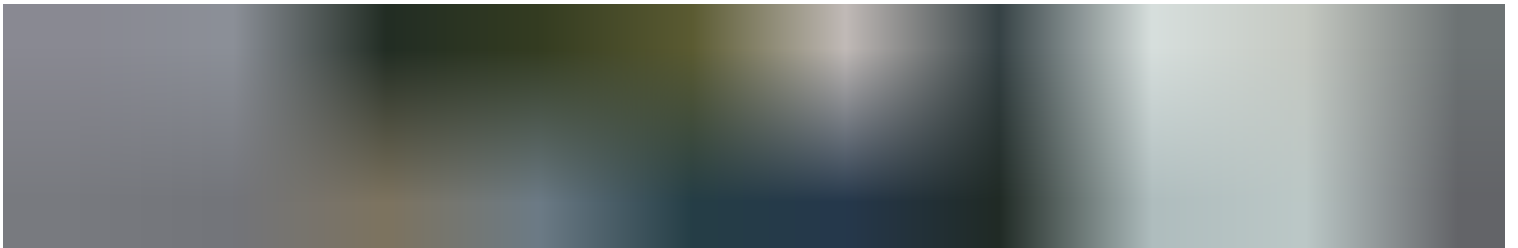
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