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Guest Internet access just got a lot easier

By MARK BLANCHARD

From Thursday's Globe and Mail

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Open sesame. The magical command Ali Baba used to open the door of a robbers' den has taken on a new meaning at a Canadian law firm.

Goodmans LLP provides guests at its Toronto office with wireless Internet access, thanks to something called a SesameSpot. Developed by Ottawa-based **Sesame Networks Inc.** and launched earlier this year, the SesameSpot is being called the industry's first self-serve, traceable and instantly available Internet access solution for guests.

"A lot of my clients don't go anywhere without their notebook computers," explains Peter Ruby, an associate at the law firm who specializes in information technology litigation. "We always have people coming in and out of here for meetings. It just makes life easier for them. There are some things you can't just do on a BlackBerry."

When visitors open a Web browser on a WiFi-enabled laptop or handheld device at the firm's office, a limited connection to Goodmans' network is created and the user is asked to punch their cellphone number into a slot on the browser's welcome page. Seconds later, a password is sent to the phone in the form of a text message. When the password is typed into the browser, the visitor is given access to the Internet through the SesameSpot. They can check e-mail, surf the Web or even log on to their own corporate virtual networks.

"It's very easy to use," says Steven Venturin, supervisor of application support with

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Goodmans' IT department. "We really don't have to get involved when a client comes in the office any more."

Before, IT staff would have been told in advance when a guest needed Internet access, manually patch a cable to his or her laptop and then connect it to an outside network. The process could be time consuming, sometimes frustrating, and the requests often came without warning.

"That whole thing doesn't have to happen any more," Mr. Venturin said.

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Whether it's a law firm, library or coffee shop, security is the first issue companies need to tackle when thinking about giving guests wireless Internet access. A SesameSpot can be a welcome answer for companies that want to give visiting employees, customers and business partners access to the Internet — without the risks. Unlike Ali Baba who had free run of the treasure cave, SesameSpots let visitors onto the Internet without being allowed near the information on the company's own network.

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"To make those business meetings effective and productive, you've got to give your partners Internet access," said Tom Hope, Sesame's president and chief executive officer. "But how do you do that? You obviously can't give them a password to your internal LAN [local-area network] because they're not employees, right?"

He says companies are often fearful of providing a completely open connection because of potential liabilities if the link is abused. "They're going to want a service that does more than just connect people. They want to know who has been on, so that if something untoward happens, they have some traceability."

At Goodmans LLP, the guest WiFi system is separate from the IT infrastructure that regular employees use every day, and access is controlled. Every time a guest logs onto a SesameSpot, his or her usage is tracked. If a rogue road warrior sends out spam, spreads viruses or uses the WiFi connection to hack into other networks, the company has some recourse.

At about \$1,500 to install and about \$1,200 a year to maintain per location, Sesame Networks predicts SesameSpots will prove to be a popular way for businesses to give their guests quick, easy and secure access to the Internet.

"One of the problems with WiFi, quite frankly, is it is very difficult to get connected when you're on the road," Mr. Hope said. "We think every business that now provides conference rooms, coffee, doughnuts and courtesy telephones is going to provide courtesy Internet access."

So far, a SesameSpot being tested at the Canadian Tire auto service waiting area on Ogilvie Road in Ottawa hasn't caused any problems for its host. Those customers who have used it have done so for legitimate reasons, general manager Randy Hodgins said.

"Everybody is always in a rush," he said. "It's letting them work instead of wasting their time."

You'll still find the courtesy phone and dog-eared magazines in the waiting area, but Mr. Hodgins hopes the SesameSpot will entice customers to stay and work wirelessly — and come back the next time their vehicle needs service.

"We have a shuttle bus," he explained. "But by the time you drop your car off and then we drive you back to your office, it wastes time. Then, you have to make your way back to the store to pick up your car." With the SesameSpot, he says, people can get some of their own work done while their vehicle is being serviced.

Back at Goodmans, the reaction so far has also been positive. "Once I tell people it's available, I never hear about it again," Mr. Ruby said. "Nobody says it's not working."

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