

Rocky Mountain News

Tiny company joins with Va. firm to give Denver an earful

Fledgling business produces audio tours of area's historic sites



Evan Semon © News

Barb Rigel, left, enlisted the voice talents of Steve Hopp, right, for a LoDo audio tour published by her company, Rocky Mountain Audio Guides. Recently, the company teamed up with another firm so people can listen to the tour using their cell phones. The tour's cost is about \$8 a person.

By Julie Poppen, Rocky Mountain News
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To Barb Rigel, it would be a beautiful thing to see a bunch of tourists walking around LoDo with cell- phone headsets in place and peering, jaws agape, at the area's many historically significant sites.

Rigel, 41, is co-founder and president of the fledgling Denver-based Rocky Mountain Audio Guides. The small company, which has yet to turn a profit, published a CD walking tour of LoDo two years ago.

CD players may be rented around town, and the most comprehensive tour CD can be purchased for \$15.95.

But sales have been sluggish, despite *Westword* newspaper naming the tour the area's "Best Secular Pilgrimage" and a coveted plug from Gov. Bill Owens.

That's why Rigel is banking on a new partnership with Virginia- based Spatial Adventures to turn things around and give her company the boost it needs to become a viable business. The partnership, launched in April, enables tourists to take the LoDo walking tour using their cell phones as guides.

Pamphlets titled *Dial Into History! With Denver's Only Cell Phone Audio Tours* have been placed in stores and hotels throughout LoDo. The tour cost is \$8, charged directly to a credit card, for a two-mile walk.

The purchase price buys 40 minutes of air time that can be interrupted if you care to stop for coffee or a beer, not to exceed 24 hours. For \$15 you can take a longer tour that buys 80 minutes of air time, Rigel explains.

Stops along the route include Union Station, Market Street, the D&F Tower, Larimer Square, the Oxford Hotel and Cruise Room, Sakura Square and Coors Field.

Plug in your earphones and you'll hear Market Street described. You'll learn about the wind-fueled blaze that started behind a saloon and ended up destroying four city blocks and 70 commercial buildings in two hours on April 19, 1863. Behind the tour guide's voice is the sound of crackling flames and sirens. Visitors also will get a dose of the area's colorful history with stories about the many brothels in an area once called "the row."

Denise Wright, manager of the city's Visitor Information Center, said people who have taken the tour have enjoyed it.

"We do get people coming in asking about it," Wright said. "It's entertaining and informative at the same time. Since there is not a source where one can get in a tour any day of the week, this is actually a very reasonable way to do it."

Wright acknowledges one drawback: Each person doing the tour must have their own CD player or cell phone.

Wright said the tour is best for "a very individual, independent type of traveler."

Joan Walker, a buyer for the Tattered Cover Book Store in LoDo, listened to and liked the CD, but she wonders how many people carry around a CD player. She said the cell-phone connection will help spark sales.

"It's really well put together," Walker said. "I didn't know those places were there."

Rigel is hoping one day to produce similar tours for other cultural institutions, or area universities and corporations. She's even eyeing her hometown of Dundee, Mich., which has become a tourist attraction thanks to the Cabela's outdoor sporting supply store there.

Spatial Adventures has similar cell-phone tours online at Historic St. Mary's City in Maryland and at the Minute Man National Historic Park in Massachusetts.

The company was founded three years ago.

"The genesis was about developing new ways of using mobile technologies, cell phones in particular, to get at tourism opportunities," Spatial Adventures President Scott Hilton said. "Last summer we embarked on a concept of bringing audio tours to places and events that are not able to be addressed by things like the wands you get at museums."

Hilton notes that two-thirds of American families have cell phones.

"It's slowly ramping up," Hilton said. "Anecdotally, with younger demographics this is an easy connection for them. It's much harder for older demographics."

Hilton said the technology can save a cash-strapped museum, park or historic district money.

"There is not a single piece of equipment on site," Hilton said. "We host it all on like a Web site almost. We have big servers in a data center. Institutions don't have to invest in any of that."

"For somebody like (Rigel), this is a perfect way to instantly expand her market."

Rigel and her partner and friend, John Tavery, 38, an independent market research consultant, came up with the self-guided-tour concept over beers in the summer of 2001. They were rethinking careers at the time and realized they share an interest in biking, history and travel. They felt Denver needed a readily available tour.

They each deposited \$3,000 in an account, launched an LLC and went to work. At the time Rigel was between jobs after taking a buyout from Avaya.

She got her friend, Steve Hopp, a former radio disc jockey who is now a quality control manager for an -area biotech firm, to be the voice of the audio tour.

"We can't afford James Earl Jones," Rigel said.

Rigel is hoping sales begin picking up as summer gets into full swing, attracting tourists to LoDo. But she has no plans to quit her 50-hour-per-week job as an account manager at a Boulder software company just yet.

"We haven't paid ourselves yet,"Rigel said. "We're obviously not getting rich on this."

Rocky Mountain Audio Guides

- Where: Denver
- Founders: Barb Rigel and John Tavery
- What: Produced a CD walking tour of historic LoDo and recently teamed up with a company so the tour can be taken by using a cell phone.
- How: Dial 703-286-6365 and use the keypad to enter credit- card information.
- Cost: 40 minutes of air time is \$8; 80 minutes of air time is \$15.
- Maps: Available at various sites in LoDo or on the Rocky Mountain Audio Guides Web site at www.rmaguides.com (you'll need Adobe Acrobat).

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