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## Device helps those with visual, hearing impairments

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KAREN WARREN : CHRONICLE

Curtis Crisler, sitting, a technical engineer, works with Christopher Howard, left, CEO of Softeq, and Trey Litel, an official with Durateq. They've helped create devices that offer audio for the blind and captioning for the deaf.

A deaf fan can now tune in as NFL quarterback Tom Brady calls a play at a display in the New England Patriots' football hall of fame.

A blind guest can visualize London in the Peter Pan Flight ride at Disney World.

And blind and hearing-impaired visitors at the World of Coca-Cola museum can now get more out of a tour of company history.

All three venues are the latest to use a rugged hand-held device created by Houston-based Softeq to give visitors with visual or hearing impairments the same experience as others.

"It's a really innovative device," said Ronald Milliman, a spokesman for the American Council of the Blind. "The people we know who have used it are very excited about it."

The durable instruments — which offer audio for the blind and captioning for the deaf — are used at Disney World, museums and a timber company.

At Disney, where the device was first used, infrared sensors pick up signals sent from transmitters placed around the park. That triggers the appropriate captions or audio descriptions. The device vibrates for the deaf, letting them know captions are about to start.

For Softeq, it's a step into the growing assisted technology industry, which experts said is fueled by venues trying to comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act, a growing number of veterans returning home with disabilities, longer life spans and the constant evolution of technology.

"There's an enormous market," said David Dikter, executive director of Assistive Technology Industry Association. "Many of technologies have come from a need to access all the other technology such as making smart phones and hand-helds accessible to people with disabilities."

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So far, Softeq's device has earned the company nearly \$3.5 million in sales revenue since 2005.

**Another division**

The little-known Houston company has traditionally focused on being the engine under the hood for hardware that consumers use, such as flash drives, MP3 players and printers. It creates the software and drivers that help the devices work. The company posted revenues of \$5 million in 2008 and in on track to hit between \$6 million and \$7 million this year, the company said.

Five years ago, the company started another division, dubbed Durateq, to create sturdy hand-held mobile devices as well as the software to run it.

**'Real time and unfiltered'**

Rick Morin, who is legally blind, used it during a biennial trip to Disney in April. The Boston resident noticed a hidden staircase and directed his fully sighted wife, thanks to the audio description he heard, to the ghostly footprints on the stairs in a haunted house the pair visited.

"We've been going to Disney since 1977, and she had never seen it," Morin said, adding that now he doesn't have to rely on descriptions by companions. "They tell you what they think you want to hear. But here you get it in real time and unfiltered."

Softeq originally created the instruments, which

look similar to PDAs encased in thick rubber, in collaboration with Disney but has since licensed the technology and sees a market beyond museums and theme parks.

"I like to say it was battle-tested at Disney," said Trey Litel, vice president and general manager of Durateq.

**'Not inexpensive'**

The company can customize the units by installing Windows-based and touchscreen applications. It can also add a credit card reader, a bar code scanner, a speaker, global positioning systems or a radio-frequency identification reader, which reads tags akin to barcodes with radio waves.

The speaker could be used with a speech generation software to help those with speech disabilities talk. And the bar code scanner could be used for everything from price checks to keeping track of inventory. The credit card reader would make it easy for waiters to take orders and print receipts at a diner's table or sell beer to fans at their seats at a football stadium.

"It can pretty much replace anything where people use a pen and paper," Litel said. But businesses and museums are hesitating because of the \$800 to \$1,200 price tag. Still, because the company can program software and provide the device, Litel thinks they've got a step on the competition.

"It's not inexpensive," Litel said. "But it's

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