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By Corilyn Shropshire, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

An estimated 44 million Americans will be using the Internet to make phone calls by the end of this decade, which is why industry watchers predict that soon microphones implanted directly into laptop computers will be the norm.

South Side-based Akustica Inc. is gunning to stake its claim as a supplier of those microphones.

This week, executives from the micro-electromechanical systems chip firm will be in California showcasing its new microphone to industry analysts and reporters from Europe and Asia. And next week, the firm will woo PC makers at a conference sponsored by Santa Clara, Calif.-based computer chip producer Intel Corp.

Akustica's microphone, made from a specialized semiconductor chip designed to block out background noise such as the clickety-clack of typing on a laptop keyboard, already is slated to appear in notebook computers this spring.

Akustica executives, who have raised \$27 million from investors to date, have been mum about which PC makers will be embedding Akustica's microphones in their notebook computers, saying only that "it's a handful."

While a limited number of today's laptops come equipped with microphones, that's likely to change as Internet phone calling -- also known as voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) -- spreads.

Soon, embedded microphones will be as common as disk drives have become, according to James Brehm, director of business development at research firm Frost & Sullivan.

No doubt the VoIP market is sizzling.

By the end of 2005, there were about 4 million Internet phone subscribers; the number is expected to more than double this year, to about 10 million, according to William Stofega, research manager of VoIP services at Framingham, Mass.-based IDC Research. By 2010, he

predicts, 44 million people will be talking over the Web.

Driving the momentum, say industry insiders, are such Internet titans as Google and Yahoo!, which are launching their own Web-based calling services and luring in more Internet phone users because of their sheer ubiquity.

Microsoft too, is sure to contribute to the trend when it launches its new VoIP-friendly operating system, known as "Vista," in the coming months.

Akustica's VoIP-focused microphone, the "AKU2000," is its first commercially available product. It will allow the firm to enter what Chief Executive Officer Jim Rock has called the "brutal" cell phone market.

The company already is prepping microphones they are hoping to sell to the makers of cell phones and headset devices used in laptops and mobile phones.

Because Akustica's microphone is made from a single semiconductor chip, it is small -- about the size of a square on a piece of graph paper -- allowing for up to four to be placed in the frame around the laptop's screen, and not take up too much space.

Mr. Rock and his team are lobbying computer makers by pointing out that Akustica's microphone can be mass produced in a standard semiconductor factory, despite the fact that it is based on micro-electromechanical technology -- which creates a tiny moving machine on a minuscule semiconductor chip that usually requires a specially equipped plant.

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