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science

This space for rent

You're staring at a cool night sky watching the stars twinkle like countless flickering candles. The crisp winter air cuts at your lungs and you can see your breath frosting into clouds. As you stand in the fresh fallen snow thinking things can't be much better, a bright Coca-Cola sign lights up the night sky. The stars immediately pale next to this bright overpowering light. The eerie glow of the sign holds your attention for a few seconds. Suddenly, you feel thirsty. You go inside for a drink. The starry night forgotten. Maybe you'll have a Coke.

Coca-Cola and other big businesses have plans for something we all share and admire — the night sky. Coke's plans are for a large orbiting satellite that will use reflected sunlight to beam a giant Coca-Cola logo into the night sky, visible every night from anywhere in the Western hemisphere.

Once launched, the satellite will require virtually no maintenance, no energy and most importantly, no advertising fees. Once the initial cost of launching the satellite is paid, Coke will get the most visible ad in all history. It'll be permanent and, faded out over time, cheap.

Aside from orbiting advertisements, private industry is making greater and greater use of outer space, once reserved for governments only. Space is becoming so cheap and accessible business can't afford not to use it. Television satellites have been up for years, but now the potential of space satellites is being realized for other applications.

Motorola, the largest manufacturer of computer CPUs and cellular phones, has become fed up with the high costs of ground-based cellular phone systems. As a result, it has

decided to put up its own network of satellites, allowing cellular communications from anywhere on the planet with crystal clear transmission.

Another more colourful enterprise plans on a remotely-controlled rover to be put on the moon. People can then pay a fee to drive it around for a few minutes, watching where it goes from a mounted camera. This one should be hung up on some rocks about five minutes after the first person has a go. The schemes big business has for space are endless, and launch costs are becoming less expensive.

NASA is the group most people think of when they think of launching satellites, but NASA charges an arm and a leg. Plus they favour scientific missions and they ask too many questions about what you want to launch. Always worried about national security, it's lucky if NASA would launch anything for a company. Luckily there are actually three or four other satellite launching groups, and all with less interest in security, particularly US security.

Russia, China, Europe and Japan all launch satellites, and are all just beside themselves trying to get geared up to launch the flood of commercial satellites they expect in coming years. Russia in particular is geared to offer the cheapest launches. They also happen to ask the fewest questions about what they launch. Using converted ICBM missiles they expect to be able to do launches for about \$11 million, far less than NASA could.

Ironically, government (NASA and the U.S. Airforce) were what triggered the space boom. In an effort to coordinate missile guidance accurately from anywhere on the globe, the US Air Force launched a network of satellites that would al-

low a small computer to receive special signals and calculate where it was with an accuracy of less than a metre.

What the Air Force didn't reckon was that people would love that kind of gizmo for their car or for pocket — hence the birth of the Global Positioning System (GPS), now a multi-million dollar industry. Much to their dismay, the Air Force didn't set its signals up the way big business would; anyone with the right gizmo can get the signal, decode it and figure out where they are.

Hence the Air Force doesn't exactly make much money off this GPS system. In fact, they make virtually none. Plus, from the fear of enemies using GPS for their own guidance systems, they have had to make the GPS network send deliberately imprecise data so enemies can't get exact readings (meaning we can't either). This imprecision (a few dozen metres) had the side effect of making business want their own GPS systems — ones that would be accurate and more importantly, ones they could charge people to use. Two such systems have already been tried, but, both failed. One didn't deliver the accuracy; the other did but only for a few hours per day as it streaked overhead.

Not that big business has given up. As many as a half dozen companies still have plans for their own GPS systems. Especially since the Air Force has talked of scrambling their own GPS signals. The only thing stopping them from doing it now is the cost of refitting all those missiles — that and they'd like a piece of the pie too if they could only find a way to make us pay for it.

Garth Sweet

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