My offbeat wish list for the next iPhone

September 12 2012, by Troy Wolverton

The flurry of rumors and reports surrounding Apple's upcoming iPhone launch have left little to the imagination about what Apple will actually announce Wednesday, but I'm still hoping for a few surprises.

According to the latest rumors, the new phone will look a lot like last year's iPhone 4S, but will have a bigger screen, a thinner body and a radio that will allow it to connect to the new high-speed LTE networks. It will also ship with the latest version of Apple's iOS software, which will include a turn-by-turn navigation system and will add new features to Siri, Apple's voice control application.

Those updates sound compelling. But I can't help it - I want more.

Here's my wish list of additional features for the next iPhone:

-More space for less. Apple has offered the past three versions of the iPhone with the same basic price structure: a model with 16 gigabytes of storage for $200 with a two-year service contract, and a model with 32 gigabytes for $300. With the iPhone 4S last year, Apple introduced a 64-gigabyte model at $400. I'd like to see those prices finally come down.

Although Apple has been moving to a cloud strategy, where music, pictures and more can be stored on its servers on the Internet rather than locally on the phone, there's still need for ample storage space on the device. Applications have grown larger to take advantage of the devices' higher definition screens, and consumers who want to watch movies or

listen to music while offline need room on the phone to store them.

To meet these needs, I'd like to see Apple increase the capacity of its $200 iPhone to, say, 32 gigabytes of storage and the $300 iPhone to 64 gigabytes.

-Speedier settings changes. One area the iPhone lags many Android devices is in allowing users to quickly change their settings. On the iPhone, turning off the Bluetooth or Wi-Fi radios is a several-step process that requires users to find the Settings application. By contrast, Android phone users can often toggle common settings through buttons placed on a home screen or located in the notifications area.

It would be great if the iPhone had something similar. An obvious place to put such buttons-which might include toggle switches for airplane mode and the GPS antennas, as well as for the Wi-Fi and Bluetooth radios-would be in the iPhone's own notification area.

-Make space for notifications. Last year's update to iOS greatly improved how the iPhone handles alerts. Notifications now can appear in a banner at the top of the screen, instead of in a window that covers - and prevents you from using - your current application.

But the new alerts on the iPhone have one big annoying quirk: they still cover important information at the top of the screen. They cloak the time, the battery life indicator and the signal strength of its cellular signal. If you have only one alert, that bug isn't terrible because the alert goes away within seconds. But if you have multiple notifications, it can be frustrating to wait for them to cycle through before you check the time or your battery life.

Here's hoping Apple uses some of the new iPhone's extra screen space to allow it to display new notifications above (or below) the clock and

standard system icons.

-Measure the air up there. Another place where Apple could stand to copy its Android rivals is by adding an atmospheric pressure sensor, which can be used to gauge the user's height above sea level.

With a pressure sensor, a phone can detect your elevation on a hike up a mountain or track the distance you ascend or descend on a run over hilly terrain, and an app could tell whether you were on the first or second floor of a mall and display the appropriate floor plan. A pressure sensor, used in conjunction with other sensors already in the device, could also potentially be used in games, making them even more capable of reacting to movements of the device.

-Freshen up FaceTime. Apple has already said that FaceTime, the iPhone's native video-calling app, will finally work over the cell phone networks rather than just over Wi-Fi in the next iteration of iOS. That's great, but I'd like to see two other improvements.

One is higher-resolution video conferencing. Right now, FaceTime is limited to low-resolution video, thanks in part to the low quality front camera on the iPhone. Even on a small screen, FaceTime video can look mushy. Apple ought to upgrade the iPhone's camera and its own systems, so the device can take and transmit higher resolution videos.

I'd also like Apple to finally live up to former CEO Steve Jobs' promise and open up the FaceTime technology to other companies. Two years after Jobs launched FaceTime and made that promise, users still have to use the FaceTime app to make a FaceTime call. Thanks to that restriction, you can't use FaceTime to connect with friends on Windows PCs or Android smartphones or those who prefer to use alternate applications such as Skype or Tango.

That's just plain silly. Here's hoping Apple fixes that - and more - soon.

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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