

DoCoMo's promise of a beyond-3G phone

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For some, having a MP3 player, camera, video player, organizer and Internet access on a single mobile phone simply isn't good enough. The picture quality must be better, as must the sound. But most importantly, the download speed has got to get even faster -- or so NTT DoCoMo is betting.

The Japanese mobile giant Thursday unveiled eight new models of its hit FOMA series of cellular handsets, which included one that was compatible with the much-ballyhooed high-speed downlink packet access protocol. The company said that the HSDPA-compatible N902iX model will be more than 10 times faster than the existing FOMA models, having a download speed of 3.6 megabytes per second.

In addition, the company said that its beyond current third-generation phone will have improved music-playing quality as well as higher security control functions. DoCoMo is expected to introduce its latest "9" series models in Japan from June onwards, with the self-proclaimed 3.5 generation HSDPA phone expected to be rolled out by August, initially in the Tokyo area, but plans to sell the product outside of Japan are still not known. The company also plans to launch its own musical download distribution service, Music Channel, to coincide with the phone shipments. Its music service will allow subscribers to download multiple songs more quickly than ever, DoCoMo said. Analysts broadly agreed too that the offering would make good use of its move last November to become the main shareholder of Tower Records Japan.

Meanwhile, the company also announced Thursday that it will be

working with Microsoft to make NTT DoCoMo phones compatible with online music stores that use Microsoft's technology.

That would make Japan's biggest mobile group compete head-on in the music-download business with KDDI, the country's second-largest carrier, and its au music unit. In one of the most cutthroat mobile-device markets in the world, Apple's globally popular iPods have not been as big a hit in Japan as elsewhere, as more mobile-music listeners prefer to have their tunes downloaded onto their cell phones rather than separate MP3 players. According to the Recording Industry Association of Japan, nearly 96 percent of the 268 million tracks purchased electronically in the country were downloaded via mobile phones.

Indeed, offering music downloads has been a major factor for KDDI's recent surge, and the carrier has seen more than 40 million songs downloaded since it started its au music service in 2004.

Earlier this week NTT DoCoMo reported that it gained 253,800 subscribers in April, raising the total number of customers to 51.4 million. However, those subscribing to its 2G services actually fell by 846,500 to 26.8 million, making it clear that people were prepared to pay more for premium services and upgrade their phones as well.

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