

Cellphone 'bells and whistles' confusing

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It used to be the case that only the die-hard Luddites scorned cell phones, preferring something simpler and less technological to stay in contact. Now, according to a recent report from Neena Buck at StrategyAnalytics, actual cell-phone users are starting to be suspicious and confused by their devices.

Customers are becoming befuddled by the new generations of cell phones that come decked out with what Buck describes as "a bewildering array of bells and whistles." Fancy though these gadgets may be, they are also increasingly difficult to use, and therein lies the problem -- who wants to buy a phone that comes laden down with gizmos if you can't use any of them?

The problem of poorly designed functionality is a new one in the cell-

phone world at least. Mobile-phone vendors and consumer electronic vendors have traditionally focused on the physical design of their devices and the hardware built into them. One of the greatest triumphs of cell-phone manufacturers came in the shrinking of the old-school brick-sized monstrosity, coming in at 30 ounces, to the modern pocket-sized phones, some of which weigh less than 10 percent of their 1973 predecessors. Even now designers compete on the near-anorectic slenderness of their creations, with the recent Samsung X820 phones coming in at less than 7mm width.

The move to rebrand phones as fashion accessories also came about when cell-phone manufacturers realized the power of the teen market. Although mobile cellular telephones were originally designed to appeal to hectic businessmen, in surveys conducted last year Junior Research reported that nearly 50 percent of 13- to 16-year-olds now own cell phones. And this is a fickle, tech-savvy and fashion-conscious segment of the market that won't be satisfied with last season's models.

Teenage customers want the newest, shiniest model that lets them e-mail each other, visit each other's MySpace sites, download music and photograph each other, all from a single handset. Whilst cell-phone manufacturers are happy to deliver on the first front, things are falling down on the second and the cracks are beginning to show.

The problems are stemming, according to Buck, from the mis-alliance of software and hardware. Manufacturers are certainly paying attention to the role of embedded software and functionality in creating a competitive advantage with their products. Every other phone on the market now comes decked with all manner of fineries including cameras, MP3 players, radios, text- and image-storage functions, and Internet capabilities. Operators too are pushing third-generation technologies as the tool that customers can use to get the most of their gizmo-laden phones. But software has still, until now, come in as a

second-best to hardware considerations, with the result that the two are not as tightly integrated as they could be.

The current round of devices pay testament to this -- although not wanting in functionality, the interfaces are poorly designed and confusing to use. In a 2005 survey by mobile software company SurfKitchen, not one mobile-phone user could identify the data services package on their phone due to poor usability.

Manufacturers should not, however, think that backing away from software to produce simpler, old-school style phones is the answer. Analyses indicate that there is strong customer demand for the high functionality that embedded software enables, but it must be packaged in such a way that customers can actually use it. This means a shift (or indeed, a greater shift) to focusing on service-oriented architecture and user interface usability, where the hardware meets the software. Failing to do so could cost both the manufacturers and the operators, as the SurfKitchen report indicated that users were failing to make use of additional data services, as they simply couldn't work out how to.

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