

Touch-screen tech coming to cellphones

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Still getting excited about being able to send an e-mail from your cell phone? That's so 2005. The life cycle of cell-phone thrills is getting shorter and shorter as users become more blasé more quickly about the extra gadgetry being piled into their phones.

Now that cameras and MP3 players come as standard for the majority of new models, cell-phone manufacturers are looking for the next big (and shiny) thing to entice users to upgrade -- and touch-screen technologies may be the answer.

According to a recent report by StrategyAnalytics, resistive touch screens are likely to be the next technology fused into wireless PDAs and cell-phones products. It's all part of the struggle as manufacturers strive to reach the promised land of convergence, where a single gadget can be



used for multiple purposes.

Touch-screen technology was developed in the early 1970s and consists of display overlays that allow the user to directly interact with their gadgets using pressure, electricity, sound waves or infrared radiation. With the expiration of many of the touch-screen patents filed in the '70s and '80s, manufacturers are no longer burdened by the costs of patentrelated royalties and the hassles of legalities. Touch screens have now been widely incorporated into a huge number of devices since then, with ATM screens being the most familiar.

Now the cell-phone manufacturers are catching on. Touch screens have already been integrated into the majority of wireless PDAs, including the ever-popular BlackBerry, and users typically use a stylus to enter data onto the screens. Cell phones, however, are still catching up, with manufacturers previously citing suspicions about the usefulness of touch screens and overall power consumption as reasons for not yet incorporating the technology into mass-market products. But, StrategyAnalytics predicts, these reasons will stop holding water as technology catches up and consumer fashion trends drive market penetration.

The demands of fashion may in fact have already begun when, in May of this year, the KG800 Chocolate model was released by cell-phone manufacturers Lucky Goldstar. Slender, stylish and, according to one excitable reviewer "so sexy," the KG800 Chocolate was the first cell phone on the market to ever incorporate touch-screen technologies. The touchpad mounted onto the front of the phone was activated by a warm touch, ensuring that the phone wouldn't be activated when bashed around in the user's bag or pockets.

Trends and fashion may not, however, be the only factor driving touch screens onto cell phones -- the gigantic, ever-growing Chinese market



may also be playing its part. Members of every corner of the wireless and telephony industry have been keeping a watchful eye on China in the past couple of years. Not only is the country already the world's largest producer of mobile phones, it may yet become the largest consumer. Subscriptions continue to soar -- according to figures released by the Chinese government in February the region had 404 million cell-phone subscribers. Not only are Chinese citizens switching from landlines to cell phones, they are expected to be eager adopters of the 3G licenses rolled out in the region last month.

But it's not just size that's important here, it's style too. Although the BlackBerry's popularity in the West earned it the epithet the CrackBerry by its dependent, addicted users, users in China were less convinced. Industry watchers cited one of the major barriers to adoption of BlackBerrys in China was the QWERTY keyboard used -- Chinese users were much more comfortable using a touch screen and stylus to input Chinese characters. Cell-phone manufacturers certainly have the will to reach out and grab as much of the Chinese market as they can, and now with touch screens they may well have a way.

Back in the West, use of styluses and resistive (pressure-activated) screens are likely to remain the tools of PDAs. Capacitive sensors -- those that conduct electric currents and can be activated by the touch of a finger -- will, according the experts, be the dominant technology incorporated into the next generation of cell phones.

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