

Analysis: Why America Needs a Google Phone

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Image: Internet search giant Google's logo. Google says it processes more than 200 million searches a day and leads the world for search engine usage with 57 percent of the current market, followed by Yahoo at 21 percent and MSN at just 9 percent.

In terms of compatibility with your existing businesses, Google building a phone would be like Chrysler starting an ISP. But rumors about Google building a phone reveal plenty about the frustrations and desires of the American technorati.

It's almost pointless to describe what the mythical Google phone will look like and do because, like the iPhone before it, it's a template for pundits to staple their wish lists. So let's boil the Google phone rumor mill – and the iPhone mill before it – down to its most primordial ooze and explain what the rumors really mean.

Internet access on phones is awful.

Media playback on phones is awful.

Modern cell phones have the power of little PCs, but they can't realize that power.

Google isn't a hardware manufacturer. They're a software company. They make insanely great Web-based solutions. Diving into hardware, for them, would be a last-ditch effort to remake cell phones into a mobile platform for great software and Web services.

I can see the frustration even within Google: they have fabulous software ideas, but the fragmented operating systems, lousy Java implementations, hideous carrier restrictions and byzantine UIs on phones prevent users from getting to them. Yahoo! is feeling the same rage. Heck, any Internet company worth their salt is feeling it.

Apple was definitely feeling it when they developed the iPhone, which in Apple's mind solves the media-on-cell-phones problem. Apple's super-strong brand and market power let them get past the miserable conservatism of the wireless carrier oligarchs who control cell phone software. Yet even Apple found itself a little hamstrung by the strong and greedy carriers: only Cingular users will be able to own that device.

Google's strong brand could help in a similar way, but I see even more conflicts between Google and carriers. Wireless carriers are often hostile to the open Internet; they see Web-based services as a security threat, and as something they can't necessarily nickel-and-dime you on. Google may find that to get any air time for their "Google Phone" in the US – if they are creating one – they'll need to cripple it in ways that would make it decidedly un-Googlish.

Partnering with an existing cell phone manufacturer at first looks like a more sensible solution than diving into an entirely new business realm without any of the existing relationships that make cell-phone manufacturers successful. But both Google and Apple tried that, and the result was less than thrilling.

Apple's collaboration with Motorola produced the awful ROKR and RAZR V3i, slow, unpleasant to use devices. Google also announced a collaboration with Motorola in 2006; it says something that I haven't yet seen a phone showing any evidence of that alliance.

Someone in the cell phone industry needs to truly think different, break all the rules, and reinvent the handheld computer (because that's what it is) from the ground up. Apple got frustrated enough to try – and I'm eagerly looking forward to see what they add to the conversation. Apple promises a new era of media playback, but their one-carrier-only, no-third-party-software policy doesn't bring an open Internet mentality to phones.

Can Google do this? I have no idea. But they're more than welcome to try, because somebody needs to.

Sascha Segan is PC Magazine 's mobile phone analyst.

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