

Analysis: Phone Apps Finally on a Diet

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For several years now, phones have been able to do all sorts of things: play music, run instant messaging clients, take pictures and share them, send and receive e-mail, and now even watch broadcast television.

However, most consumers ignore this stuff and just use the phones to make calls.

The reality is that phones are still too hard to use. Even we geeks can kill a few minutes cycling through option lists just looking for where all the features are located. No one wants to drill down through menus every time they watch a video or send a picture to someone. These things should be as quick and easy to use as possible on a cell phone, if consumers are going to use them at all.

Consequently, this year at CTIA there was a strong focus on making things easier for the average phone user. Aside from the expected swirl of social-networking features – everyone wants to be the wireless MySpace – it seems that software vendors are cognizant of the fact that no one will use their services if it takes too many clicks to do anything.

Even simple Internet searches are affected by this. The ubiquitous Google Search Results page, which shows a pile of links, is usually good enough on desktop computers. On a phone, people don't want to browse aimless lists of links. Instead, they'd rather get tips on where nearby restaurants are located, where hotels are, what movies are playing – information that's targeted to the user's current location, and search results that have reasonable, practical value.

Portal sites are way overstuffed with features these days, and unfortunately that trend has so far carried over to the mobile side. Users have 97 different ways to run a search or call a taxi, all of which require lots of button pressing. Yet now we're seeing Yahoo! and Microsoft try and one-up Google by creating efficient, mobile search pages that put as much useable information as possible in front of the cell phone user in one shot. (Google is already onto this trend and has a new, streamlined mobile search page).

Smartphones still lack built-in GPS capability for the most part. Lots of feature phones already have GPS functionality compared to smartphones, in an unusual reversal. Still, vendors are anticipating the next Treo or Q, so they're building location-based services with an emphasis on travel, local search, and event planning.

Companies like Handmark and MobiMate are building their smartphone apps such that information can be exchanged between different parts of an application. Your phone can see where you are, tell you the nearest Indian restaurant, dial a friend from your contacts list, and reserve movie tickets, all with a few clicks. These information aggregators also bypass horrendously designed, built-in menu systems and multitudes of slow WAP pages, and instead use their own clearly laid out interfaces.

AT&T's keynote speech at the conference was all about simplicity . Adobe knows that no one can design a good mobile interface without the right tools, while Mercora thinks users are tired of syncing music libraries and just want a ton of music available at a moments notice.

Maybe this is all in anticipation of the iPhone, a handset that's expected to turn everyone's notion of a proper phone UI design on its ear, regardless of whether or not it sells like crazy at launch.

The handsets may get smaller and more fashionable , but the feature lists

aren't growing. Instead, given today's overly complex, difficult-to-use phones, it seems the wireless industry is finally realizing that consumers can't even find the features in the first place.

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