

Analysis: At CTIA, Phones Are Fashion, Not Tech

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Cell phones exist at the junction between technology and fashion: for millions of people, they're as key to their wardrobes as a sharp suit, little dress or new handbag. At the CTIA trade show this year, geeks took a back seat to the fashion crowd as the industry seemed to decide that what people needed was not new features, but new looks.

The old-school PC Magazine reader (and John Dvorak) might groan at all this, but it isn't a bad thing. Technology isn't for geeks any more. It's universal; it's part of our world, and people want to express themselves through the technology items they hold.

I didn't see many new features at this year's show. What I saw were new designs: Kyocera's better-living-through-chemistry S-shaped hinge , Motorola's chrome RAZR , LG's stainless-steel flip and Alcatel's line of nearly two dozen fashion phones .

Whether the companies in question were longtime stalwarts or new entrants, the battle was still over looks. VeryKool and Pantech weren't throwing in the world's most advanced chipsets, but they were showing retro and modern designs. It seemed that for the moment, everybody was satisfied with a certain feature set: a 1.3-megapixel camera, a music player which hopefully syncs with Windows Media Player, and moderately fast Internet access with a WAP browser.

That isn't to say that some of the new designs couldn't have used new software. The Samsung UpStage, with its two faces, has a radically new

look that demanded a new way of navigating the phone, but it was damaged by a relatively generic software stack.

The show's best phone, the Helio Ocean, had both a new dual-flip design and genuinely new technology. The Ocean's unified SMS/MMS/IM/e-mail client is a long time coming. There's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be able to bring together every kind of message you could possibly get on one handheld. Between its good looks and powerful communications prowess, the Ocean could finally let Helio make some waves.

The cell phone industry does have new technologies, and new tech challenges, up its sleeve. They just took a back seat with the phones this year. Sprint wants to put WiMAX in everything, from cars to portable DVD players. Verizon's new MediaFLO network has raised the bar for mobile TV, sending AT&T and others racing to catch up. AT&T had a lunch where they teased us about the iPhone and the various uses for their upcoming HSPA (high speed packet access) network, such as video sharing. And both Nokia and LG brought truly cutting-edge European phones to the States, in Nokia's 5-megapixel N95 and LG's Prada phone, with its elegant iPhone-like interface.

Maybe the focus on fashion is coming because the tech guys are retrenching, trying to figure out how all people can actually use all of these new features they've added over the past five years or so. That's what I got from AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson's speech, where he said his company's priority was ease of use, and I was encouraged by work from both Microsoft and Adobe at the show where they demoed new user interfaces and browsers that could help people get to the bottom of these distractingly multifunctional handheld computers more quickly. (Samsung could definitely use the help.) If you've ever tried to send a picture message – or been scared away from trying to send one – you'll appreciate their work.

Would it be too much to hope 2007 is the year cell phones become as easy as they are sleek? I'd be willing to slow down the triumphant march of feature-itis for a while to make the insides of phones, not just the outsides, organic extensions of our personalities and our wishes. With the Apple iPhone just around the corner, hopefully more people are thinking along those lines.

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