

Hands-On With HTC's First Laptop

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Smartphone maker HTC announced the first major surprise of the CTIA wireless trade show this year by unveiling the Shift, its first Windows Vista PC. The company also displayed a US version of the Advantage, a device that straddles the line between a large PDA and an ultralight laptop.

These products are the two most impressive of HTC's planned 10 to 12 product launches this year, marketing vice president Todd Achilles said during a meeting with PC Magazine last week. Among the other product launches will be new smartphones for CDMA carriers with Verizon, Sprint, Alltel and Telus using a new Qualcomm chipset that "lets us get down to a price point never reached before," Achilles said.

HTC Shifts Perspective

Until now, HTC has mostly made Windows Mobile smartphones, such as the Cingular 2125, 3125, 8125 and 8525 and the T-Mobile MDA and SDA. The HTC Shift, which PC Magazine had the chance to test, looks like a tablet, but fits in a large coat pocket. More specifically, it's about the size of two DVD cases stacked on top of each other, and we estimated the weight between 1.5 and 1.8 pounds.

The Shift operates on Windows Vista Business Edition and includes tablet extensions for writing on the screen with the included stylus. To place the Shift into Laptop mode, slide the screen back and tilt it up to a 75-degree angle..

The Shift's keyboard is much improved than the ones we've seen on other sub-laptops like the Sony UX and OQO Model 02. The keys are small and tight, but with actual travel: when you push a key, you push it down and it springs back like on a real keyboard, not a thumb-board. We estimated the key pitch at about 17 mm.

HTC released a few more, but not all, of the specs for the Shift. It dons a 7-inch, 800x480 touchscreen, 1GB of RAM, 30GB hard drive, Bluetooth 2.0, Wi-Fi 802.11g, tri-band HSDPA and EDGE for cellular connectivity. Along with the touchscreen, you can navigate with a tiny Synaptics touchpad on the right-hand side of the screen; there's a fingerprint reader just below that for security. A small, 1.2-megapixel webcam sits on the upper left hand corner of the device. HTC wouldn't comment on the processor or graphics chipset, but told us that the device supports Windows Vista's Aero user interface graphics.

However, the Shift doesn't come without its shortcomings. There are only a few ports: a VGA out, SD card slot, and one USB port. A dock or port replicator might be available when it launches, HTC said.

Most importantly, the Shift has a lust factor. It's bigger than other nanoportables like the OQO, but its soft metallic luster, high-res screen and real-looking keyboard made us, at least, believe that could get some work done on it. The device will launch in the third quarter of this year through "standard PC channels," not at cell phone stores, and it will be "aggressively priced," HTC reps conveyed.

HTC's PDA/Laptop Advantage

One step down from the Shift is the Advantage, which straddles the line between PDA and laptop. HTC announced a European version of the Advantage at last month's 3GSM trade show in Barcelona; today, it announced the U.S. model.

The Advantage comes in two pieces: a flat slab of a keyboard and a CPU unit that looks and feels like a large PDA. The two attach with magnets in two ways: you can slap the keyboard onto the PDA like a screen protector, or sit the PDA on the keyboard like a mini-laptop. The device runs Windows Mobile 6 and promises eight- hours of battery life - one reason HTC chose Windows Mobile rather than Windows Vista.

The Advantage's specs resemble that of a PDA and laptop. It features a 5-inch, 640x480 touchscreen; 8GB hard drive; 256 MB of RAM; a mini-SD card slot, and VGA video out. There's a 3-megapixel camera on the back, and the Advantage can connect to the Internet and make phone calls over quad-band EDGE, tri-band HSDPA, Wi-Fi 802.11b/g or Bluetooth. The processor is a 624 Mhz Marvell (formerly Intel) PXA270, with an ATI graphics accelerator. The US model ditches the European version's second, front-facing camera and instead adds GPS capability.

Users will get a kick out of the Advantage's built-in accelerometer, which can be used to navigate on the device. For instance, with the

Opera Mobile 8.65 Web browser, you can tilt the whole device forward or back to scroll up or down on a page.

Like the Shift, the Advantage will be sold through PC channels and will hit shelves in early June. HTC didn't provide us with a price.

Verizon and Sprint Get Some Love

HTC's PPC/XV6700 Windows Mobile handhelds for Verizon and Sprint are still the most powerful PDA/phones for those two carriers. But after more than a year, they're looking outdated. The good news is that HTC announced today the P4000 and S720 handhelds, the next generation of its CDMA line.

The P4000 and S720 are Windows Mobile 6 devices with screens that slide to reveal full keyboards; the P4000 has a large touchscreen, while the smaller S720 has a standard phone keypad on the front and no touch screen. Both use Qualcomm's new 7500 chipset with a 400 Mhz processor, and will be upgradeable to support the super-high-speed EVDO Rev A networks that Verizon and Sprint have rolled out.

The S720 is actually a CDMA version of HTC's S710 "Vox," which the company announced last month at 3GSM. It's a bit squarer in shape and less chromed, but it has the same appeal: it looks initially like a standard candy-bar phone, but when you slide out the keyboard, the screen rotates into PDA mode.

HTC isn't announcing either device for a US carrier yet. The P4000 will be coming out with Telus in Canada, and the S720 hasn't been announced with any carriers. But it's a safe bet that Verizon and Sprint execs are on the phone with HTC right now.

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