

Helio Introduces Sidekick Killer

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The new Helio Ocean is a dual-slider messaging phone that finally sets the "MySpace carrier" apart.

Social-networking-focused wireless carrier Helio released its first truly stunning new phone today at the CTIA trade show, a device called the Ocean which could beat the T-Mobile Sidekick at its messaging game.

Up until now, Helio has been known more for youthful attitude and its MySpace relationship than for ground-breaking phones. While all four of Helio's phones - the Hero , the Kickflip , the Drift , and the Heat - have been exclusive to Helio, they've all fit well into the mainstream of phone technology in the US.

The Ocean, on the other hand, pushes envelopes. If it works well, it's the kind of phone you'd switch carriers for: a true messaging maven that brings together e-mail, IM, and MySpace in an elegant device that will satisfy pretty much everyone from ages 15 to 30, whether they're in school or have an actual job.

Built by Korean manufacturer Pantech to Helio's specs, the Ocean is a 4.33-by-2.2-by-.86-inch oval weighing 5.61 oz. Slide the keypad down and it looks like a standard slider phone. Slide it sideways and it has a full keyboard for messaging.

Internet access here seems excellent. For e-mail, the Ocean supports POP3/IMAP, Microsoft Exchange corporate e-mail, and various popular freemail accounts, including Yahoo! Mail and Gmail. AIM, Yahoo!, and Windows Live Messenger IM clients are built in - not to mention MySpace. The Ocean's contact list syncs with AOL, Yahoo!, Helio Mail, and Exchange, and shows IM presence information in the contact list.

For Web browsing, you have a full Web browser - no more WAP! - along with an updated MySpace client and the ability to do "multi-headed" searches of Google, Yahoo!, and Wikipedia right from the gadget's home screen. Music-wise, it supports Microsoft Windows DRM, including subscription files from Yahoo! and Napster. Macs can play too, with the Ocean's 200MB of internal storage and up-to-4GB MicroSD card slot appearing as a USB hard drive on Mac desktops, and the music player supporting unprotected AAC music from iTunes. You can listen to music through wired or stereo Bluetooth wireless headphones.

There's a lot more here, too. Built-in GPS lets the Ocean fire up Google Maps or Helio's own Buddy Beacon application (which shows where your Helio-toting friends are on a map.) A 2-megapixel camera comes with a new application that GPS-tags your photos and uploads them to

Helio's photo Web site. And like all Helio phones, the Ocean uses Sprint's high-speed EV-DO network, which is about five times as fast as the T-Mobile Sidekick 3's EDGE connection.

I'm excited about the Ocean because it finally seems to fulfill Helio's promise - to deliver new phones with new software that make us think about messaging in new ways. Phone interfaces are broken and annoying, and if the Ocean can show a new way to do comprehensive, integrated messaging, it can push the whole industry forward (and possibly win a lot of clients over to Helio.)

Helio is really good at pitching products, and I haven't laid my hands on an Ocean yet - wait for a full report tomorrow. If this thing lives up to its promises, it will send competing messaging phones like the LG enV and Samsung U740 on Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile's Sidekick 3 running for cover. The Ocean will go on sale this spring for \$295.

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