

Kyocera Melts, Squirts Steel to Make New Phone

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Forget reinventing the phone. Kyocera decided to reinvent the steel molecule for a radical new hinge on their E5000 design phone announced here at the CTIA trade show.

Typically known as a midrange manufacturer of no-nonsense phones, Kyocera has a new message this year. They're leveraging their Japanese background to produce designs they call "East meets West" – sleeker, better-looking phones for CDMA networks like Virgin Mobile, Verizon, Sprint and Alltel.

So let's not bother to talk about the specs. Rest assured that their new E-series phones (which stands for "Expression") and M-series ("Millennial," meaning 'for the kids') have the usual array of 1.3 megapixel cameras, TransFlash memory card slots, and basic MP3 players.

Instead, let's focus on the hinge. The E5000 is based around a truly weird stainless-steel S-shaped hinge which seems to make the two halves of the phone float, separately, in midair. If you don't look too closely, the top and bottom of the phone don't seem to be properly attached, yet the whole assembly feels as solid as the steel it's made from.

The hinge is made from injection-molded stainless steel, which is apparently impossible. So, Kyocera says, they got some chemists to reshape the steel molecules from octagons into spheres so they could squirt out these oddball hinges.

The lower-end E2000 and E1000 models lack the hinge, but are similarly sleek, with slim, rectangular forms and mirror finishes. They'll stand out on a shelf full of RAZR clones, that's for sure.

Kyocera also updated their oddball Virgin Switchback messaging phone into something that people over the age of 12 won't be embarrassed to carry around. The M1000 is still an inexpensive, basic candy-bar that flips open to reveal an internal screen and full QWERTY keypad. But it's a rounded, metallic rectangle rather than a silly shoe-shape. The M1000 also has a 1.3-megapixel camera, a bigger space bar and a centered cursor pad, much better for gaming than the Switchback's layout. Like the Switchback, it will be targeted at the price-conscious SMS and IMer, not at e-mail fanatics.

The company identified four customer segments they want to hit. There's the fashionistas and the kids, served by the phones above. But they also want to serve road warriors and the elderly. The elderly market will get the S1000 – a very simple, easy, pretty ugly little phone which could sell for as little as \$40 on prepaid networks. Kyocera could probably do better.

The road warriors don't get a phone at all, at least not yet. But they do get the KPC680, an ExpressCard update to the beloved KPC650 PC Card, a PC Magazine Editor's Choice, for connecting to high-speed EVDO networks. The 680 is a stylish little EVDO Rev A card with a chrome band that could be colored red for Verizon or yellow for Sprint, and two innovations. The antenna flips up and then twists out a bit, separating itself from the body of the card and giving it much better reception. And the LED lights on the card's face show signal strength, something I haven't seen on a high-speed PC Card before.

The KPC650 was the fastest EVDO Rev 0 card, so I'm excited to test the Rev A successor. Kyocera promises speeds up to 36 percent faster than

the competition.

Kyocera's new phones will be rolling out through the summer and fall.

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