

Little-known HTC ready to bring its brand into the limelight

October 29 2009, By Brier Dudley

If you haven't yet heard of HTC, you will soon. The Taiwanese mobile-phone company with U.S. headquarters in Bellevue, Wash., is launching a huge campaign this week to raise the profile of the HTC brand.

An ad blitz trumpeting a new slogan -- "quietly brilliant" -- is intended to reach 95 percent of Americans at least 36 times during the holiday season, when you just may be shopping for a new phone.

Simultaneously, the company is planning to double the size of a secretive Seattle "innovation center" led by former [Microsoft](#) designers where HTC is creating software to give its phones unique style and features.

It's the crescendo of a three-year effort to reposition HTC from a faceless Asian device manufacturer into a consumer brand that stands in buyers' minds alongside [Apple](#), [BlackBerry](#), [Nokia](#) and Motorola.

Already the 12-year-old company has sold \$1.6 billion worth of phones in the United States -- \$4.6 billion globally. That includes every model so far running Google's [Android](#) software and 80 percent of the [Windows Mobile](#) smartphones.

But the company is still relatively unknown among mainstream phone buyers, who are steadily moving toward premium smartphones.

HTC's big momentum in this market is also about to be challenged by new Android phones coming soon from Motorola and others.

Meanwhile, phone companies, motivated by AT&T's success with the iPhone, are encouraging HTC to raise its profile independently and in cooperative ad campaigns.

The carriers "have been asking us to build a consumer-facing brand such that we are driving customers into stores saying 'I want my first HTC, I want my HTC,'" said Steve Seto, director of marketing.

But the company is doing more than advertise to build its identity.

It's also investing in design studios, including an industrial design shop it acquired in San Francisco and a user-interface software lab that it has quietly built up over the past two years in Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood.

The Seattle lab was initiated by Horace Luke, a University of Washington graduate and veteran of Microsoft and Nike who was hired in 2006 to lead HTC's design work.

Luke, who is based in Taiwan, tapped Drew Bamford, a former Microsoft user-experience designer, to lead the Seattle innovation center.

It's not just Microsofties, though. They tapped into the unusually high concentration of wireless talent in Seattle.

Getting to see Bamford is tricky.

You have to find an unmarked door in an old brick building that leads to a dark hallway, where there are no signs of HTC.

When the elevator stops, you pass through a heavy steel gate and walk around a dividing wall before you see anything or the 30 employees.

Then it's a bright, funky space with lots of whiteboards, big monitors and magazine-like displays of various customer types HTC is targeting.

There's also a sound studio where all the various ringtones on HTC phones are developed.

But the tour is fairly limited -- the whiteboards are mostly erased, and nobody can discuss what they're developing for the future.

The art is not just in the software but in balancing the competing demands for the phone's on-screen real estate.

Working with T-Mobile USA, HTC's phones are "primarily branded T-Mobile and have kind of a T-Mobile experience or even a [Google](#) experience," Bamford explained.

Yet HTC is also working to introduce design features that are consistent across all of its phones, identifying them as HTC devices.

"We have an ambition to maintain both of those businesses but, as a company, the general trend is more toward building an HTC-branded experience," Bamford said.

The new foundation is the "Sense" interface for Android phones that Bamford's team developed and released this summer on the [HTC](#) Hero from Sprint.

Its ability to be easily customized is a focus of the "quietly brilliant" campaign.

Seto is another local hire working to raise HTC's profile while navigating the complicated relationships with its various partners.

He was hired a year ago from Starbucks, where he was brand director.

It was his job to make sure people had a consistent Starbucks experience around the globe, whether they bought and drank the coffee directly or through a partner or licensee.

Directly and through collaborative campaigns with carriers, he said, "we're really amping it up."

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