

With FaceTime, Apple has chance to dominate video calls

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After decades of false starts, will Apple be able to bring video chat to the masses? While the technology, which would allow people to see those they're talking to, has long been in place, and video conferencing is drawing increasing numbers of business users, video chats are still far from an everyday event for most consumers.

But on Monday, Apple announced its latest [iPhone](#) would feature a technology it calls FaceTime. Apple is expected to sell millions of iPhone 4s, putting the technology -- literally -- in the hands of a worldwide mass market.

And because it's opened the technology to outside developers, consumers

using phones running Google's [Android](#), Microsoft's Windows Mobile and other operating systems could soon be able to make video calls to consumers using iPhones.

This has the potential to make video calling mainstream, but Apple's initial effort comes with a long list of shortcomings.

That said, I'm excited about using FaceTime to see my kids when I'm away on business trips, or making video calls to my parents in Texas.

FaceTime aims to address many of video chat's past shortcomings. First off, it's dead simple to use. You just place a phone call like you normally would.

If you and the person you are calling both have a FaceTime-compatible device -- right now, that means an [iPhone 4](#) -- you can start a [video call](#) by simply pressing a FaceTime button, located next to the mute, speaker phone and "add call" buttons that iPhone users normally see when using the phone. Once the other person accepts, the video call starts.

So, unlike [video chat](#) services on the PC, for instance, you don't need to download any special software. You don't have to guess whether your friends are using the same video chat service. And you don't have to worry about having an online alias -- or remembering those of your friends.

Because it's on your mobile phone, FaceTime is also much more flexible than PC-based video-chat services or old landline video phones. You can use it on the couch, in the kitchen or just about anywhere you can get a connection (more on that later).

FaceTime doesn't solve the issue of incompatible services. You can't make a video call to someone using [Google](#) Talk on a PC or Skype on

one of the new TV-attached Web cams. But Apple is making a push in that direction, offering up the technology underlying FaceTime as an open standard.

That means Skype, Google and other companies could build FaceTime technology into their applications, allowing consumers who don't have an iPhone 4 to make video calls to one who does.

The problem is that while FaceTime has a lot of promise, so far there's not much there there.

Apple itself touched on what's probably its biggest shortcoming at the event Monday: It will only work over Wi-Fi. That limitation automatically restricts where you can use FaceTime. So while Apple touted the ability to share special moments with your friends and family, you better make sure those moments happens near a hot spot. If they don't, you can't share them. In other words, don't expect to show grandma your son or daughter's soccer game anytime soon.

Apple said it's talking to its wireless carrier partners, including AT&T in the U.S., about being able to use FaceTime over their networks, but it also said that at least for this year, it will be Wi-Fi only. And the wait could be longer, given the problems networks have had in supporting the amount of bandwidth iPhone owners already use.

But that's not the only shortcoming. For now, FaceTime only works between iPhone 4s, meaning both you and the person you want to talk to must have the latest Apple phone.

That limitation is baffling to me. Apple could and should have linked FaceTime with iChat, the Apple instant messaging program that's already running on millions of Mac computers with built-in Webcams.

Similarly, the iPhone 3GS -- last year's model -- has a camera that supports video and a relatively fast processor. It doesn't seem like a huge leap to think that it could have supported FaceTime, even if it doesn't have a forward-facing camera.

That would add millions of potential users.

And while it's great that Apple is opening the FaceTime technology, other companies are pushing their own -- incompatible -- video chat technologies to be the next standard. There's no guarantee that Google or anyone else will adopt FaceTime.

You also can't call multiple people at once. That's too bad, because often you want to share those "special moments" with more than just one person.

I have no doubt that Apple will address many of these shortcomings in due order.

If it does, I really think the company has a great chance of finally making video calling mainstream.

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