

Mobile Mayhem

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May 2003

We haven't seen anything yet! At least not when it comes to mobile phones. Or, perhaps I should say mobile computing & communications gadgets. It is a bit of a shame that the difficulties and delays in the widespread roll out of 3G telephone networks around the world have rather deflated the public perception of what is possible on the move. Contrast this with the quite unexpected runaway success of text messaging and we see an interesting picture.

On the one hand, a clumsy and very limited text messaging system has captured the imagination of virtually everyone under the age of 40 (this is when we suddenly lose the essential suppleness in the ligaments of the thumb). Meanwhile the wonders of rich multimedia mobile communications remain surprisingly hard to sell. It may be quite spurious but I believe that we can draw some interesting conclusions from this comparison. Most successful new mass market technologies go through a similar pattern of growth, starting as expensive luxuries only a few can afford or justify and building up slowly until a critical mass is achieved. At this point they seem to go from luxury to necessity in a very short time, specialist shops appear on every street corner and prices tumble.

It is quite amazing to witness the way in which the grown up end of the market reacts to the change, how many of you (us) swore blind we would never have a mobile phone, then got one for emergencies and now never leave the house without it. What is interesting about the text messaging phenomenon is the way it has taken off quite unexpectedly on the back of the mobile phone boom. Kids use text messages because they are cheap and (according to certain teacher friends) because they can be sent unobtrusively during lessons replacing the note traditionally intercepted by the teacher and used to humiliate all concerned. For me the turning point was the realisation that text messages were by far the best way to contact potential babysitters at short notice.

So where does all this leave the next generation of media rich mobile technology? Lets face it the only question is how soon will those young enough to be bothered to experiment with it be in a position to afford it. For most of us, having the ability to send pictures to and from mobile phones is probably not an essential, at least not until someone else has experimented with it enough to find out what makes it so indispensable.

But its not really just about phones that send photographs, the future direction of telecommunications, computing, and media will continue to converge as more and more computing power can be packed into portable devices and more and more information can be packed into a radio wave. Our appetite for communication is limited only by the cost and convenience of the services we are offered and our willingness to learn how the infuriating thing works. But if there is something new with a potential to extend their access to friends and

exclude parents and other sad old people we can be sure that there is at least one section of the market that will embrace it as soon as dad can be persuaded to afford it.

Meanwhile, business is discovering the potential of text messaging, it's quick its simple, it's surprisingly easy to integrate into general business systems or link to websites and most important of all, the vast majority of people have access to it. In many ways text messages are the ideal compliment to the Web in developing e-business processes. They can be used to send and receive information specific to the individual in a timely manner, this can be automatically linked to other applications as diverse as the provision single use passwords for access to secure websites or paying for a tram ride in Helsinki. New companies are springing up all over to develop SMS based products and services and the poor old telecoms companies are having to cope with many times the volume of messages they designed their networks to cope with.

So whilst the teenagers are finding out what to do with the next generation of mobile technology, I confidently predict that the world of business has only just begun to apply its creativity to the myriad potential applications of the humble SMS.