

Almost There

Chris Geldhill, Managing Director, PDMS Ltd

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By a happy coincidence I have recently contrived to damage or loose both my mobile phone and the hand held computer or PDA which serves as a replacement for that part of my brain which used to be able to remember my appointments and contacts. This fortuitous turn of events provides me with an ideal opportunity to revisit both of these markets in search for the perfect executive gadget.

The requirements are simple enough, I want to be able to make and receive calls, have access to my electronic diary and contact list, and use text messages and email. The device needs to have reasonable battery life and fit into a pocket without serious damage to the lining of my jacket. Also the ability to take photographs, listen to the radio and have the most infuriating ring tone in the room would clearly be a bonus...

Thus armed with a list of requirements it is time to see what the market has to offer. The main themes in the mobile phone market at the moment are GPRS or 2.5 G and MMS or multi media messaging services. GPRS is rapidly filling the vacuum left by the delay in rolling out 3G services in any volume and makes mobile access to the internet a realistic proposition. MMS enhances the phenomenon of text messaging by allowing phones to send pictures. Consequently upmarket phones now increasingly come equipped with a built in digital camera and a larger colour screen.

The wide spread availability of GPRS provides two important benefits compared with the GSM standard. It can function as an 'always on' link to the internet and other networks and it can support data rates similar to a fixed line modem used by a PC to access the internet over a conventional phone line. What this means in practice is that it is feasible to send a picture from or to a mobile phone and also that access to online information services can be more or less instant because there is no need to dial up first.

However, this in itself, is not giving me what I want, in order to be able to access my diary and calendar the phone must be able to synchronise with the relevant information on my PC. With larger screens, more computing power and easier text entry, this is more the territory of the PDA than the phone. However a closer look at the PDA market reveals an increasing number of devices which function as both a standard PDA, and when you slip in a SIM, a mobile phone.

Just as the PDA is starting to edge into the phone market so new 'smart phones' are appearing with larger screens and a PDA derived operating system. These phones can synchronise with your PC run all manner of useful or entertaining programs, even recognise your handwriting in some cases; but they still look like phones.

Speaking to people in the industry it seems that the convergence of the phone, PDA, digital camera and personal stereo is set to accelerate over the next year, with new products lining up to try and carve out the best compromise for different sections of the market. The importance of the operating system your phone uses will also become a significant factor as phone users start to gain access to the wealth of freeware and shareware applications and games available for the PDA.

Another interesting battleground will be the overlap between the conventional mobile phone networks and the services available through wireless (wifi) network hotspots that are springing up in places like airports and coffee shops (not to mention the odd Douglas winebar). These networks also have the potential to offer access to cheap voice services which bypass the mobile phone network providers.

Then there is the question of access to corporate networks whilst on the move, particularly intranets and email. Whilst in theory this is all possible through GPRS out of the box, in practice it can be more of a challenge. This is where new entrants to the market like RIM with their Blackberry devices see an opportunity. They provide both the device in your pocket, a combined PDA and mobile phone with a neat miniature keyboard, and the service, which allows your mail provider to automatically forward mail direct to the PDA using the 'always on' aspect of GPRS.

Having had a good look at the market with a company credit card burning a hole in my pocket, I have come to the rather unsatisfactory conclusion that now is not the time to buy the state of the art because it's moving so fast at the moment. So I did the next best thing and bought yesterday's top of the range PDA / phone for a quarter of the price on ebay. Maybe this time next year I'll have another look.