

BlackBerry, Q, Treo, BlackJack â€” key productivity tool or toy for the bored

by Jonathan Sidener

Look around any airport waiting area, courthouse corridor or trendy restaurant and you're bound to find busy professionals thumb-typing on their shrunken keyboards.

SMART PHONES - Recently, cell phone manufacturers have been cranking out a slew of new models optimized for mobile e-mail. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. Road warriors, lawyers and other deal-makers find sustenance in mobile e-mail. In the past, chances were, typing on a BlackBerry. But that's changing. Maybe they prefer the Palm Treo, or the Motorola Q, or the Samsung Blackjack, or any of at least a half-dozen other phones from Sony Ericsson, LG, Nokia and Kyocera that come with little keyboards.

In recent months, manufacturers have been cranking out a slew of new models optimized for mobile e-mail. Most sport "QWERTY" keyboards on their faceplates. Others, such as the new Wing from HTC and T-Mobile, have hidden keyboards that slide or flip into view. And the iPhone offers a virtual keyboard on its touch screen.

Manufacturers and cell phone carriers appear to be convinced that phones with keyboards are the way of the future, that every butcher, baker and candlestick maker needs the same level of information connectivity as a stockbroker, Hollywood agent or chief engineer at a nuclear reactor.

A generation ago, only doctors and other important people could afford or justify the need for portable pagers, but over time, the exclusivity and price fell. Eventually, nearly every kid in the neighborhood had pagers to summon them home for dinner.

In some ways, the e-mail phone is this generation's version of the pager. At first, it was a status symbol that spoke of its owner's indispensability. But with competition from the new models, smart phones with full keyboards are coming down in price. Not long ago, most cost at least \$600. Today several can be bought for around \$100, along with a two-year contract.

"Some people buy technology as a status symbol," San Diego technology psychologist Larry Rosen said. "They feel that as soon as somebody else has a new gadget, they need to have one. They're the early adopters who tend to carry it and show it off."

Rosen, who recently bought his first BlackBerry, said there are two other types of consumers for a BlackBerry-type device, those who need mobile e-mail access for productivity and those who are enamored with the technology, even if they don't need it.

"There are people who have a mobile work life," Rosen said. "They need to keep up with their e-mail, and they can't drag their laptops out all the time."

Rosen, a technology author and professor at California State University Dominguez Hills, uses his BlackBerry to keep in touch with students at the campus 100 miles away.

Gadget people who buy electronics they don't really need are victims of the "can/should paradox," Rosen said: Technology makes it possible to do something, so they think they should.

"They think that someone has gone to the trouble to make something, so it must be worthwhile for them," he said. "I spend a lot of time at Fry's watching people. You see guys looking at the electronic fish finders. You can tell they're not fishermen, but they buy it anyway."

While Rosen thinks the people who truly need mobile e-mail represent the smallest of the three categories, hard-core BlackBerry users - self-described "Crackberry" addicts - say it's the reverse. It's a productive tool for most people.

Ivan Williams, an IT professional in Atlanta and a moderator on the enthusiast site Crackberry.com, said it's quaint to imagine a modern professional who thinks of a BlackBerry or some other phone with a keyboard as a status symbol.

"Maybe back in the day," Williams said. "Maybe five years ago. Today I'm surprised if I see a business that's not using them."

Before being interrupted for a telephone interview, Williams had been sitting on his couch watching TV and answering e-mail on his BlackBerry.

"Sure, I could pick up the phone and call everyone back," he said. "But on the phone you get drawn into long conversations. E-mail is the quickest way to answer a question."

"I could drag out the laptop and have the full-sized keyboard, but then you've got it getting all hot on your lap they way they do."

Williams said that before long, almost everyone will want an e-mail access and a keyboard on their mobile phone.

"It's not about keeping up with the Joneses or gadget lovers having the latest gadgets," he said. "It's not just business-driven. It's about having access to information.

"One of the phone companies had BlackBerries on sale for Mother's Day. They understand it's not just about business users."

Steve Jones, a technology researcher, author and associate dean for liberal arts and sciences at the University of Illinois Chicago, sees mobile e-mail as part of the natural evolution of electronic communications.

Cell phones replaced many land-line calls because they didn't require callers to be at a set location, Jones said. E-mail replaced phone conversations in many cases because it eliminated the need for two people to synchronize their schedules.

Now, for two demographic groups, text messaging and mobile e-mail are replacing traditional, computer-based e-mail. Mobile e-mail can be read wherever and whenever it's convenient, Jones said.

Jones, who sends and receives e-mail on his iPhone, said it would be easy to dismiss mobile e-mail as an unnecessary service for many people. But technology fills complex needs for people. Many of his students say they turn the TV on when they're home alone - not to watch it, but to feel less alone.

Text messaging and mobile e-mail may fill the same need, leaving people feeling connected and less alone, Jones said:

"It's hard to determine who has a legitimate need for mobile e-mail."

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