

Son of iPhone: the next revolution

The world expects Apple to unveil its new mobile next week. It will have fast internet access and other cutting-edge features. They need to be good, says Mark Harris, because rivals are trumping the original

It seems as if it was only yesterday that Apple unveiled its revolutionary iPhone, yet the company is already gearing up for the launch of its successor. As with the original, the new phone will boast many of the features that have helped make Apple one of the most desirable brands in the world. It will also have some new features, including 3G technology to speed up internet access, and applications that could herald a brave new world of mobile communications.

Gadget fans the world over are eagerly counting down the hours to Monday, June 9, when the new phone is expected to be unveiled by Steve Jobs, Apple's chief executive.

The original iPhone, launched in the UK last November, was genuinely innovative for being able to respond to gestures and strokes via a touchscreen, while its gorgeous web browser was the digital equivalent of a glossy magazine. Less popular were its clumsy text entry and outdated 2.5G data connection, which made for painfully slow texting, web browsing and e-mail collection. The upgrade to 3G will at least provide a much faster, smoother internet experience. The move should also mean that users are less likely to be cut off during voice calls, and may now sample the dubious delights of face-to-face video calling, thanks to a front-mounted camera. The high-speed technology will also make it easier and quicker to download music and videos from the web, or upload photos.

If you think that the speeds offered by some 3G networks are fast, an Australian mobile network is claiming that the new iPhone will be able to use the latest 3G technology (known as HSDPA) to offer internet access at twice the speed of the fastest UK home broadband services today.

With nobody beyond Apple's walls having yet seen a 3G iPhone — the company is famously tight-lipped when it comes to new products — little else is known about the new handset.

There is industry speculation that the 3G iPhone will be priced at £200 at least — plus the cost of an annual contract. There's also talk that Apple will use that large touchscreen for more than just stroking and poking — the company recently filed a patent for integrating solar panels into its handheld gadgets. Instead of using a separate, fold-out panel, Apple's plan is to put solar cells behind the LCD screen, so the more you flash your iPhone around, the more power it could generate.

The original iPhone scored on style and innovation



Francesco Guidicini

some in eastern Europe without a 3G network," says Ian Fogg, research director at JupiterResearch, the high-tech analysts.

In the longer term, Apple is expected to introduce a family of phones, in the same way that it shifted from selling a single, original iPod to offering a range of music and video players. Apple will also have to decide whether to keep the touch interface, which requires a large screen, or move to a more traditional design in order to reduce phone size. iPhone nano, anyone?

Although Apple impressed a lot of geeks with the iPhone, sales have hovered around a modest 20,000 units a day worldwide, and that's a drop in the ocean compared with the 3m phones that sell every 24 hours. That doesn't mean the world's biggest phone makers can afford to ignore it, says Fogg. "Apple had never built a mobile phone before the iPhone, yet its designers created the best mobile media player, and the best mobile

browser on the market. Apple has already caused its competitors to respond and change their strategies," he says.

Nowhere is that more apparent than in the rash of rival 3G touchscreen handsets — dubbed "iPhonies" by industry insiders — that have appeared over the past six months. While none of these phones has approached the iPhone's effortless ease of use, some at least threaten to steal Apple's technical thunder, and often at a considerably lower price.

HTC's Touch Diamond handset, for instance, not only weighs less than the iPhone but also uses blisteringly fast HSDPA technology and includes a GPS receiver for navigation. Or take Samsung's F480 phone, which trumps the iPhone's weedy 2Mp camera with a 5Mp snapper, complete with flash.

Apple clearly has some catching up to do. Many other manufacturers are already selling their second or third HSDPA phone, and have technology such as GPS and digital cameras working well together.

If Apple lacks the research muscle to fully develop the iPhone itself, it is gambling on a new strategy to keep its gadgets up to date by allowing other companies to develop features and applications for users to download directly to the new iPhone.

Jeremy Green, an analyst at Ovum, the telecoms research company, says: "It makes sense for Apple to do this, using the creativity of lots and lots of people to improve their products."

But will that be enough? Green questions Apple's decision to partner the iPhone exclusively with a single UK network operator — O₂. "In the UK mobile market, the four biggest operators have roughly equal market share. If you go exclusive with one, you're denying yourself three-quarters of the market."

O₂'s current iPhone contracts include all-you-can-surf mobile internet, and free use of around 6,000 wi-fi hotspots in the UK. It's not clear yet whether O₂ will offer the same deal on the 3G iPhone — although a wi-fi connection is almost guaranteed, as 3G signals can fade quickly inside buildings.

Abroad, Apple is already edging away from exclusive deals. It plans to ship iPhones to at least two operators in Italy, and future deals are unlikely to favour a single mobile phone network. However, Apple's deal with O₂ here still has some time to run, making it extremely unlikely that other operators will be able to sell the 3G iPhone when it launches.

Whatever Jobs reveals on June 9, though, it had better be good. The Apple brand isn't only about style, and that global gathering of geeks is expecting a phone that's as least as innovative as its predecessor. If it isn't, there's no guarantee the iPhone won't be a single-ringtoner wonder such as Apple's ill-fated Newton handheld computer, rather than an all-conquering success like the iPod.

How the new iPhone may look



Front camera

A new digital camera will show your face to the person you are talking to, so you can make video calls

3G technology

The latest HSDPA connection gives broadband-speed internet access (up to 7Mbps in the UK) for speedy web browsing, e-mail collection and smooth video calls

Touchscreen

The 3.5in screen, the same as on the original iPhone, lets you view photos, surf the web, choose contacts and compose text messages with your fingers

Solar cells

Although unlikely to appear in the first 3G iPhone, Apple plans to install solar power technology behind the screen of future gadgets

New applications

Outside companies will be allowed to create programs for the iPhone for the first time — expect video streaming, Voip internet phone calls, office software and much more

Main camera

Updated to give high resolution snaps, with geo-tagging that pinpoints the location where each photo was shot

Wi-fi

Wireless internet connection allows you to make Voip internet phone calls and browse the web without using 3G, but only when you are in a wi-fi area

New colours

The new 3G iPhone should come in three colours: white, red and classic black

Wi-fi hotspots spread like wildfire

Apple's whizzy new 3G iPhone may boast speedier internet access than its predecessor but it could soon be outpaced by the rapid growth of free wi-fi hotspots.

With free wireless internet connections now being offered by everyone from McDonald's to coach companies, some buyers may balk at upgrading to the new model when their current iPhone (not to mention many smartphones) already has a built-in wi-fi capability.

A report by Ofcom, the telecoms regulator, last year put the number of UK wi-fi hotspots at about 12,000. But Jiwire.com, an online directory of hotspots, claims the number has already more than doubled to about 26,800. Wi-fi can be faster than 3G, so, as it proliferates, time-sensitive mobile surfers may increasingly prefer it — especially as a growing number of hotspots are free of charge.

Wi-fi works independently of the network service on your phone, instead relying on antennae around the hotspot, which use radiowaves to transfer data at broadband speeds without cables.

McDonald's has linked up with the Cloud, one of the largest providers of wi-fi hotspots in Britain, and is in the process of rolling out free wi-fi access across 1,200 of its restaurants. Coffee shops such as Starbucks have led the way in providing wi-fi hotspots (the Starbucks service is provided by T-mobile and is not free), and wi-fi can now be found in Borders bookshops, on some trains and coaches and in airports.

While some companies charge customers for wi-fi access, many simply see free wi-fi as a way to attract customers. The Oxford Tube bus company, for example, offers

free wi-fi on all its coaches to London.

It isn't only the commercial sector that is driving growth. Last year, Birmingham city council joined forces with BT to launch a project dubbed Birmingham Fiz (Fiz stands for free information zone) to offer wi-fi access to information about the area across one square mile of the city centre (full web access incurs a charge). Anyone with a wi-fi device can log on.

Westminster city council claims it will have the largest (paid-for) wi-fi zone in Europe when its service reaches full capacity later this year. Operated by BT, the zone will stretch for six square miles, offering wi-fi access all the way from Oxford Circus to Whitehall. BT is involved in similar city-centre schemes in Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, Liverpool and Cardiff and plans to expand its Wireless City programme to Sheffield, Bristol, Nottingham, Portsmouth and Glasgow.

Another BT initiative, BT Fon, allows BT Broadband customers to share their home broadband connection with other users via wi-fi, and in return use other BT Fon users' wi-fi links for free while out and about. BT claims it already has 100,000 subscribers. The service is now being extended to business users, who could use it to provide wi-fi access to customers.

One problem is locating a hotspot. The Hotspot Detector keyring (£14.99, see www.gadgetsquick.co.uk) might help. It claims to be able to detect hotspots within a range of 300ft, although it can't tell you if they're free. Alternatively, try searching on the jiwire site (www.jiwire.com), www.free-hotspot.com or www.cityspace.com.



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