
Qualcomp PDQ

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Qualcomm CEO Paul Jacobs' appearance on the Charlie Rose Show brought back memories of the earliest days of smartphones. Jacobs told Rose that he originally proposed adding a cellular radio to the Apple Newton MessagePad. When Apple demurred, Jacobs headed to Palm, then owned by 3Com, where he negotiated a license for Qualcomm to build a phone based on Palm OS.

The original Qualcomm pdQ wasn't very good—I later described it as “a Palm glued to a phone.” It had all the functionality of a Palm 3 PDA and a typical CDMA phone of the late 1990s, but virtually no integration between the two sets of features. As I recall, you couldn't even dial the phone by looking up a contact on the Palm and tapping the number. The only real advantage was that you got to carry one big device instead of two smaller ones. Needless to say, it sold poorly.

The followup pdQ a couple of years later was a more interesting product. By then, Qualcomm had sold its handset business to Kyocera, including the in-development pdQ 2. The revamped pdQ was a much more appealing product. It was much smaller than the original and offered some real integration of PDA functionality. It also borrowed the primitive Web-browsing capability of the Palm VII. Data communication in those days was limited to a theoretical maximum of 14.4 kilobits per second and you often did much worse than that, so the Palm system relied on pre-digested and condensed web snippets.

Interestingly, in the same BusinessWeek column in which I wrote about the Kyocera pdQ, I also dealt with what turned out to be the true ancestor of the modern smartphone. The Handspring VisorPhone was pretty terrible product from the company set up by Palm's founders to build licensed Palm-compatibles. The VisorPhone, \$299 with contract (!), was a GSM phone module that slid into the accessory slot of a Visor PDA and added phone and SMS apps to the standard Palm repertoire. Not many people bought it, but Handspring used the design experience to build the Treo 300, the first truly integrated smartphone, and the Treo 600, the first successful one.

CLARIFICATION: Turns out folks at Qualcomm in addition to Paul Jacobs have fond memories of the pdQ. Engineers who worked on the project point out that there was some significant integration between the phone and the Palm including the ability to place a call from the Palm Address Book, a “find and dial” search for phone numbers across apps, Address Book search from the phone dialpad, and APIs to give third-party Palm developers access to pdQ phone features. These features don't sound terribly exciting today, but they were breakthroughs in 1999.

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and wrote BusinessWeek's Technology & You column for 15 years. Since leaving BusinessWeek in the fall of 2009, he has written his own blog, Wildstrom on Tech and has contributed to corporate blogs, including those of Cisco and AMD and also consults for major technology companies.

Call Me Back on My Handheld
February 25, 2001

When I looked at the convergence of wireless phones and handheld computers in my last column, I concluded that companies were far more likely to succeed at adding phone functions to handheld computer platforms than in trying to turn phones into computers. This week, I take a look at some products that do a good job of turning handhelds, or personal digital assistants, into phones.

Like all of their breed, these hybrids tend to be clunky, at least by the standards of today's sleek, pocketable phones. But there's a limit to how small you can make a PDA and keep it useful. The slickest new device is the "Palm-powered" Kyocera Smartphone, which will probably cost \$400 to \$500 with a service plan. It's the successor to the Qualcomm pdQ phone of 1999, which struck me as a Palm glued to a phone. Not only was it huge but there was little integration between the phone and the Palm components.

Not so the Smartphone. At 5.6 inches by 2.6 inches, and 7.3 ounces, it's bigger and heavier than the Ericsson R380 I looked at last week. But it's also much more adept. Flip down the dialpad, and you have what looks--and works--like an elongated Palm. You get all the familiar Palm applications, 8 MB of memory, and one-button syncing with your desktop information.

DESIGN GLITCH. With data service from a CDMA wireless carrier such as Sprint (FON) or Verizon (VZ), you also get an assortment of wireless features. The Smartphone emulates a Palm VII and can use all of the applications that have been written to grab bits of information, such as stock quotes or traffic reports. It can view both special Web sites designed for Wireless Application Protocol phones or standard Web sites, though the limitations of the Palm display may seriously limit what you can see. It can use any standard e-mail account, using the Palm address book to locate recipients. In a world of fragmented wireless technologies, this versatility is a huge plus.

The design isn't perfect. A little wheel on the left side of the phone supplements the standard Palm scroll buttons for easy one-handed use. Unfortunately, when holding the phone in your left hand, an earphone plug sticks out right where you want the base of your thumb to be. And since you get maximum advantage from the Smartphone by using it with a headset, this is a nuisance.

The VisorPhone from Handspring (HAND) is a Palm clone with a phone stuck on. It's a GSM phone module -- \$499 for outright purchase, \$299 with service from VoiceStream (VSTR), Cingular, or Powertel (PTL) -- that slips into the Springboard slot of a Handspring Visor. It offers all the wireless features of the Smartphone, plus short message service, a function similar to instant messaging. The module plus Visor makes an awkward phone, but the excellent touchscreen phone interface makes you wonder why Kyocera bothered with a dialpad.

Europeans will soon see some additional PDA-based phones. The Wireless Assistant from France's Sagem and Mitsubishi's Trium Mondo are phones based on Microsoft's PocketPC design--something like Compaq iPAQs that make phone calls. Both will communicate with the Internet at up to 64 kilobits per second using the GPRS service now being deployed in Europe. That's at least four times faster than current phone-based data services available in the U.S.

HELP COMING. North American customers will get an interesting choice later this year when Samsung introduces a phone based on Microsoft's Stinger project. It will be less versatile than a full-fledged Pocket PC. But the prototypes that I have seen feature a big display and a clean, simple user interface in a package smaller and more phonelike than the Smartphone or the Visorphone.

Getting a PDA and a phone into a single package is a design challenge that, when solved, will be a real convenience for users--just one device to carry, plus the ability to dial the phone directly from your address book. As wireless data networks improve, however, the display and data-entry limitations of conventional phones will become more obvious and the software flexibility of a handheld computer will become more desirable. At that point, the combination phone-PDA will be an imperative. With luck, today's experiments will mean that manufacturers will be ready when the happy

