Apple iPhone raises the bar

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Apple iPhone raises the bar for handset interfacesÂ
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Apple unveiled its new iPhone at the MacWorld show in San Francisco yesterday with a streamlined user interface that is sure to cause rumbles in the handset manufacturing community. Featuring a large 3.5â€• display and only one button, all of the controls will be virtual and operated through an advanced touchscreen interface.

Apple has clearly issued a challenge to other manufacturers regarding user interface and input technology. Apple CEO and co-founder Steve Jobs referred to the current crop of smartphones as â€œhard to useâ€• and described the problem as being in the bottom 40% of the handset, â€œkeyboards that are there whether you need them or notâ€•. Apple has determined that the best alternative is to remove the keyboard entirely. This will allow for a far more flexible user interface that will be driven by the application being accessed. The iPhone virtual interface will be driven by a modified version of Appleâ€™s OS X operating system, already seen by many as an archetype for consumer friendly interfaces.

Although it is certainly innovative and exciting, it is unclear how well the iPhone interface will stand up to the rigors of daily use. While the â€œbig-screenâ€• concept may work well for viewing multimedia and web content, in theory, having to constantly clean off fingerprints, makeup, and smudges may prove irritating to consumers. In addition, the daily punishment of being tossed into a purse or thrown into a pocket with car keys may prove problematic. Apple has already faced some criticism in this area with the introduction of iPod Nano, whose first generation was plagued by complaints of easily scratched and damaged polycarbonate screens. And, while an iPod screen can be easily protected by a case, it is unclear how easy it will be to shield a touchscreen from, well, contact.

Despite these concerns, the iPhone appears to be an early hit with both consumers and investors, even taking into account the fact that the first unit will not ship for another six months.

IMS Research Analyst, Bill Morelli, commented, â€œApple has changed the dynamics of the handset market just with its entrance. Regardless of the impact the iPhone has in terms of unit sales, the impact on handset design and user interface will be felt for years to comeâ€•. He continued, â€œIt is a certainty that devices offering similar design features will start cropping up from other manufacturers, similar to the influx of RAZR imitators that started appearing on the market in the latter half of 2006.â€•

Handset navigation has long been a source of frustration for consumers. Handset manufacturers and operators have struggled with the challenge created by squeezing more functionality into the handset without making the operation too complex. Apple has moved this debate front and center with its bold proclamation of a leapfrog device that will revolutionize the handset market.

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