

Will Touchscreens Leave the Keys Behind?

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Although 2006 will be remembered as the year that thin was in, 2007 is shaping up to be breakout year for touchscreens. The touchscreen has suddenly become the interface of choice for manufacturers wanting to make a trendy splash with their cellular handsets. Recent weeks have seen announcements from Apple, Samsung, and LG, showcasing new handset models that feature touchscreens as the primary input device.

Although touchscreens in cellular handsets are not a new technology (models offering a touchscreen have been commercially available for several years), previous handsets did not have the benefit of the market buzz from a high-profile product launch such as the iPhone. Consumer awareness of touchscreens in cellular handsets has dramatically increased since the MacWorld show, and manufacturers are racing to take advantage of the media attention.

Touchscreens do offer significant benefits for manufacturers who are struggling to differentiate their product from competitors. First and foremost, touchscreens offer a novel user interface for the consumer. Manufacturers and operators are banking on this novelty to drive sales. A second key benefit is the increased screen size that can enhance multimedia applications. Operators with an interest in providing Mobile TV and other multimedia content have been quick to recognize the appeal that this will have for consumers.

These benefits are offset by some potential drawbacks. Naturally, the first is cost. A touchscreen interface is significantly more expensive than using a standard keypad, increasing the cost of the BOM. However, the increased demand from OEMs should help to bring those costs back down as more touchscreen handsets hit the market. The second drawback is also very familiar – power use. Touchscreens draw more power than physical keypads, increasing the demands for an already scarce resource. Finally, with an unproven track record, it is unclear how strongly consumers will embrace the touchscreen as a primary input technology, especially with the lack of tactile response. Although Samsung has announced its SCH-W5559 handset will feature tactile feedback (provided by Immersion's VibeTonz technology), the lack of tactile feedback in most handset models could be a significant drawback.

IMS Research Director, John Devlin, commented, "Consumers have been demanding handsets with easier to use input technologies and a cleaner user interface. The touchscreen is a tool that manufacturers can use to help achieve these goals." He continued, "The willingness of consumers to embrace touchscreens in cellular handsets is going to be the key measure of their success in the marketplace."

Although handset manufacturers and operators are embracing the newfound popularity of the touchscreen, traditional keypads will continue to be the mainstay for the foreseeable future. Cost, ease-of-use, and power efficiency will all be strong motivators for manufacturers to continue to invest in traditional keypads.

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