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Finance

Fri, Sep 08, 00

Palm Inc's cheap offering is too little too late for Joe Soap

By NIALL MCKAY

Back in the days when I wore short trousers, the nuns used to say "you can always judge a man by the state of his shoes". The rules have changed. In the electronic age, you can always judge a man or woman by the type of gadget they carry around in their bag.

Electronic personal organisers say as much about the man or woman as the Filofax did in the 1980s. At least that's what the marketing people tell us.

Is she a cheap plastic-type gal or a classy brushed-aluminium act?

There's only one problem. Until recently only the geeks and gadget freaks have been able to afford them.

Finally, after milking the market for all it's worth, Palm Inc, those nice people who brought us the Palm Pilot, have decided to let the plebs in on the action and in August released a Palm Pilot for \$150 (€169).

For the past four years Palm Pilot, an electronic organiser that's slightly bigger than a pack of cigarettes, has cost between \$350 and \$450, too much by far for the average consumer. True, it's quite a nifty little device because it basically gives you one place where you can store all your addresses, phone, fax and e-mail contacts.

Palm's goal is to bring the Palm Pilot to the housewife or house-husband. That's no easy task since connecting the thing to a computer with a serial cable is difficult. The task is further complicated because you have to learn a new alphabet called graffiti to enter data. However, once you

have achieved these two feats of engineering you are well on your way to becoming as organised as . . . well some of the geeky people that you know.

For my part, I actually find my Palm V quite useful. Recently, I moved across the bridge to Oakland from San Francisco. Now, I am not the type of guy who's good at directions. So, each morning before I set out for my meetings I log on to an online atlas called MapQuest, type in my starting point and destination address and click. Hey presto, it comes up with turn-by-turn directions. I press another button and it's saved to Palm Pilot. Of course, I could print out the directions but then how would I justify my investment?

These days, though, it's difficult to decide exactly which device to buy because there are more new gadgets making their debut than there are Internet marketing strategies.

It's all down to that awful word "convergence". Should I buy a cell-phone-cum-organiser, an organiser-cum-personal stereo or a pager-cum-organiser? Oh to hell with it. Maybe, I'll just buy a notebook.

While all these functions are converging, the market, say the manufacturers, is diverging. One device will not suit everybody. So they are proceeding to bombard us with truckloads of gadgets that do everything from play your favourite music to help you buy and sell stocks and shares.

Of course, technology shamans all believe that gadgets and gizmos are due for primetime. Frankly, I am sceptical.

To my mind, primetime is perhaps 189,624 months away. The technology is just not ready yet. I don't think that any of them will manage to take the gadgets from the exclusive realm of the technohipster to the real world of the housewife or house-husband.

The reason is that they fall just a tad short of being truly useful to the mainstream consumer. For example, the best thing about the Palm m100 is that it's cheaper than the previous version. But it's difficult to operate and has few applications of interest to Joe Soap.

While it would be nice to believe that it's Palm's mission in life to bring handheld computing to the masses, one wonders why it has taken them so long to do so.

It looks more like Palm is just trying to kill off its competitor and licensee Handspring, which brought out a low-cost electronic organiser based on the Palm operating

system last year. But perhaps I am just bitter, having paid \$400 for my Palm V.

"You were ripped off," Palm's chief competitive officer told me. This is not what I needed to hear to produce a balanced article about the contraption.

So, I decided to get a second opinion and asked my plumber Roger what he thought of it. He is considering buying a personal organiser but, like the rest of us, is at odds as to which one he should get. He didn't like the m100 because the screen was too small and he hated the Palm's graffiti data entry method.

Still the company is trying. The m100 has a modular design which will allow users to plug in modems, MP3 players and extra storage. The most useful application slated will be the mobile Internet Kit which will let people use their mobile phones to send and receive data. This will turn it into a portable e-mail terminal.

But it's too little too late. By the time the third-party manufacturers release these modules (perhaps in six months time), users will, no doubt, be able to get the same functionality from smaller units. So my advice is to wait a while.

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