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Sunday, November 14, 2004

Companies' woes handy for consumers

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Columnist

It is no secret in the technology world that handhelds have become a handful for companies trying to sell them.

No less a consumer electronics giant than Sony bailed out on the business altogether, discontinuing its Clie line of handhelds.

The corporate history of Palm, whose original Palm Pilot was the first successful personal digital assistant, or PDA, has been marked by so many mergers, acquisitions and spin-offs that one wonders how they find time to actually make products.

Microsoft jumped into the market with its Pocket PC -- recently renamed Windows Mobile -- operating system, which was adopted by such computer makers as HP, Dell and Toshiba, all of whom have been busily undercutting each other.

Despite all these machinations, or perhaps because of them, PDAs grew in popularity to the point where pretty much everyone who wants one has one.

Therein lies the industry's current problem. Once you do have one, you rarely have any compelling need to go get a replacement.

To get a handle on the current PDA market, I tested three units:

r PalmOne's Tungsten E (street price around \$180): This PDA is positioned at the low end of the company's corporate line and the high end of its consumer range, and is its best seller. This is an elegant little device that, as does the lower priced Zire lineup, meets most users' basic needs to carry information with them on the road. The Palm OS

is simple and user friendly; synchronization with Microsoft Outlook and Office is excellent.

r Dell Computer's Axim X30 Pocket PC handheld (\$200 to \$350 depending on configuration): My test unit was at the higher end, with both WiFi (networking) and Bluetooth (cordless connectivity) wireless capabilities. The unit is compact and has pretty much every feature a business user would want. In theory, the X30 should have been a megahit for Dell. But apparently it wasn't, since just as this article was going to press, the company rolled out a new and more expensive flagship handheld, the X50.

r Verizon Wireless's version of the PalmOne Treo 600 (\$450 with a two-year contract for Verizon service): This is a "smartphone" that combines an organizer with a cell phone and is intended as an alternative to the Blackberry. Treos are more functional than Blackberries, albeit less an object of corporate lust. I found that it did an excellent job of integrating its phone, organizer, e-mail and browsing capabilities.

While seemingly similar in design, Palm OS and Pocket PC devices actually are quite different in concept. The Palm was designed to be an electronic organizer -- a way to carry your address book, calendar, notes and the like that you used to carry around on paper. Pocket PCs, on the other hand, were conceived as handheld computers -- capable of handling much of the word processing and numbers crunching that PCs do.

The additional functionality that Palms now have, such as the ability to read and write Microsoft Office documents, comes largely thanks to the work of Connecticut-based DataViz, which developed software such as Documents To Go, Beyond Contacts and SmartList To Go. I recommend that PC users immediately upgrade to DataViz's Documents To Go Total Office bundle (\$30 upgrade) to give you a full range of data transfer options with your PC. (Beyond Contacts and SmartList To Go are not available for the Mac.)

The industry's difficulties mean good news for consumers. You can acquire solid devices at attractive prices. Basic calendar, address book and notes devices can be purchased for less than \$100, while Pocket PC/Windows Mobile devices can be found for as little as \$200. I wouldn't call them a bargain, but there are some good buys out there.

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