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Blackberry competitor allows you to be too much in touch

Help Desk
By Al Gordon

You see them everywhere, the hapless victims of society's latest addiction crisis. Some get their fix furtively when they think no one is looking; others brazenly flaunt it. The affliction does not respect age or ethnicity, although social class is a factor, as moderately deep pockets are needed to indulge in it.

I am talking, of course, about the scourge of CrackBerry dependency.

You don't actually have to have a BlackBerry to be addicted. Kids, for example, have their own variant: cellphone text messaging. The term also applies to those who own one of the slew of BlackBerry competitors.

Canada's Research in Motion Limited (RIM), which makes the BlackBerry, created not just a new gadget but also a sociological issue to go with it: "Is there such a thing as being too much in touch?" And its corollary: "How much in touch can you be without being annoying to everyone who isn't?"

Clearly, a little first-hand research is in order.

I have a BlackBerry 7250, and Verizon Wireless provided me with a test unit of the new Treo 700p, a much touted challenger. As always with high-tech matters, there is no perfect solution, and making a choice is dependent on what features are most important



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to you.

True to its roots as an e-mail device, the BlackBerry is excellent at handling text. Its control structure, in fact, lets you do many tasks one-handed. However, it is mediocre as a phone and barely acceptable as a personal digital assistant (PDA). The truth is that unless your needs are primarily e-mail-focused, the BlackBerry is no longer the best smartphone.

The Treo handles PDA functions like contacts, calendars, and to-dos admirably because it is, after all, a Palm Inc. PDA at heart. It has a touch-screen and can use the large array of add-on Palm software. However, it is not as easy to use one-handed - its navigation buttons are more clunky than the BlackBerry's wheel - and some programs won't accept commands unless you use the Palm stylus.

But the Treo is much better as a phone: Its shape is taller and narrower than a BlackBerry. There is one button dedicated to answering calls, plus it uses the touch screen to display a convenient virtual keypad for dialing. And it has modern cell phone features such as a camera and speakerphone.

A decisive edge is that the Treo 700 series allows users to access Verizon's high-speed wireless data network, giving the Treo a huge edge in downloading e-mail attachments as well as in Web browsing. Moreover, you can use it as a modem with your laptop to get your computer onto the Verizon high-speed network.

The downside to the Treo is that it is expensive - \$400 with a two-year service contract. Bear in mind, though, that monthly charges for all smartphones are around \$125 a month for a typical data plan and will add up to vastly more than the cost of the device itself.

As for the sociological aspect of smartphones, the answers are a little less clear-cut.

If your work keeps you out of the office much of the time, there is no question that your productivity is enhanced. You can read or send crucial information ahead of a client meeting or after it. You are able to e-mail contacts when you are on the road instead of having to make a cell call. Your communications options are greatly expanded. The need to schlep a laptop is greatly reduced.

But being always connected means always connected. Your e-mail is with you at dinner, at a party, at a ballgame or movie. It's one more bite taken out of your privacy if you have a demanding boss or client.

Moreover, each new tech gadget seems to bring with it one less inhibition about using it. Someone who would not answer a cell

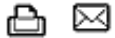
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phone call during a meeting probably would check e-mail on a smartphone. Even more pernicious, smartphones appeal to users' desire to fidget - or to show off. Instead of doodling on a notepad or twisting a paperclip, for example, you check your e-mail. And if they are being honest, smartphone users will confess that from time to time they will use it just to impress onlookers with how busy or important they are.

Like any addiction, CrackBerry syndrome can be an ugly thing.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.



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