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Trying to judge the iPhone's effect

BY JAMES H. BURNETT III

On the grand scale of pop culture phenomena, it is no small matter that the new Apple iPhone, which hits store shelves at 6 tonight, is being hailed by many as the next life-altering piece of personal technology.

If true, it could put the iPhone on the same tech pedestal as cable television, the answering machine, the personal computer -- and the Internet itself.

On the surface, the iPhone boils down to this: Priced at either \$499 or \$599, depending on memory size, it combines a telephone, a full-service iPod digital music player and a Web browsing tool that displays pages in HTML, so they appear the same as on your computer screen.

But the iPhone's real effect likely won't depend on whether it's deemed the best cellphone ever. Industry experts say its impact will be the inspiration it provides for the next big technology leap.

"The iPhone will not be that next earth-shattering piece of personal technology. It won't," says futurist and personal tech analyst Richard Laermer. "But it will do what few other products have done over the past few decades. It will change how we live by forcing others to follow its lead.

"It will be to us what MTV was in 1982. There have come along other music video stations and outlets that are just as good or better. But MTV came first, and it came all about color and flash and had regular people saying to each other, 'Wow! Did you see that?' There you have the iPhone."

Critics who have used the iPhone say it lives up to the pre-release hype but does have drawbacks -- not the least of which is a touch screen-only design for text messaging that isn't fat finger-friendly. But such flaws do not matter, says Laermer, author of the best-selling book *TrendSpotting*.

"Seriously, the iPhone will usher in a new wave of creativity. Who knows what the competition, and no doubt Apple, will be offering in the way of cellphones, thanks to the race this is going to start?"

INTUITIVE PHONES

Bill Griswold, a technology professor and cellphone developer at the University of California, San Diego, thinks he knows.

"The great potential here is for cellphone carriers to perfect the integration of different features," Griswold says.

"Whereas the iPhone, for example, allows you to scroll your music lists with the touch of a finger and tap on an image of an album cover, then on the song on that album that you want to hear, in the future phones like this will be even more intuitive. They may detect patterns in what you listen to and pick your next song for you. I'm telling you this step is so important because it will make Microsoft and Nokia and all those guys try harder."

Dan Miller, vice president of mobile solutions for Naples-based Neighborhood America and tech

"philosopher," agrees that sharing and accessing entertainment media -- music, film, television and music video -- will get easier with every new incarnation of the iPhone.

"It won't revolutionize, but it will be evolutionary," Miller says. ``It's already there in part, with iPhone's ability to stream YouTube videos and fully support them. Over the next few years, we'll see video content cataloged and shared on these types of phones the way you can do with music collections on the iPod."

Miller says the iPhone or its competition will eventually make text messaging obsolete, replaced by real-time video chat.

"At some point they will move the camera around from the back of the cellphone to the front and you'll be able chat that way," he says.

``From an industry standpoint the iPhone really is like a Mac in a phone. You'll also at some point be able to download new features and functions, the same way you do with your home computer."

BUSINESS FEATURES

But not everyone is going to spend as much as \$600 on a phone just to be entertained. For some people, the evolution of the iPhone's business features is all that matters.

Prakash Gupta, technical director for iPhoneWare, a software company not affiliated with Apple, says the iPhone's visual voicemail is its most convenient feature and one that could expand to cover e-mail in later incarnations of the iPhone or competitor devices.

"How many times have you missed a number of calls, and even though you were looking for one in particular, you've had to listen to the first several (voicemail messages) before reaching your target message?" Gupta says. ``This feature of the iPhone will allow you to see who left a message and select in any order you want which message to hear first. The advantage is expedience."

Court McQuire, senior vice president and creative director of Green Advertising in Boca Raton, says he'll be in line at 6 p.m. when the iPhone goes on sale nationally.

"Basically, research and e-mail have strapped me to my computer more than I'd like to admit," McQuire says. ``With iPhone I can conduct research and creative think tanks whenever the idea hits me."

McQuire, who over the years has been a first-to-get-it kind of person where personal technology -- especially cellphones -- is concerned, says the very idea of the iPhone creating a tech company feeding frenzy is exciting.

"The next big thing is the convergence of technologies, rather than a new widget," McQuire says.

'POSSIBLE DOWNSIDE'

But if the iPhone indeed spawns an era when we all have full-service computer phones strapped to our hips, it could have social implications.

"There's a possible downside," Laermer says. ``For all the speed with which devices like this will connect us to one another, communication might become so easy -- so like a face-to-face conversation -- that we further alienate one another. The advent of communication technology has coincided with an erosion in social skills.

``And imagine how much more those skills will fall off if and when we develop that perfect electronic communications device? Look at what instant messaging did. It gave us the ability to be lazy, to electronically blurt something out to another person with no frills and virtually no effort. This could lead to more of that."

Initially, however, there's little doubt that the first buyers of the iPhone will command a lot of attention.

"The iPhone will start conversations. Pull it out in an airport waiting area and you will get swarmed," says Russ Meyer, chief strategy officer for San Francisco-based Landor Associates.

``It will make people buzz. And when people buzz corporations listen."

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