



Multimedia Phones

A Look at the Multimedia Phones: Why This Time They're Really Going to Take Off

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Multimedia phones that deliver voice and video, and promise better productivity and third-party application integration, are starting to make a noticeable appearance in the marketplace. And although the emergence (or some might say re-emergence) of such devices may be inspired in part by the success of the iPhone, INTERNET TELEPHONY sources tell us that these new multimedia phones are unique from the iconic product given they typically are pretty affordable relative to their capabilities and lifecycles, are always on and don't require users to recharge them.

"The media phone market, for both businesses and consumers, seems poised to take off with a number of communications vendors introducing new media phones this year for the home or office," says Sandra M. Gustavsen an analyst at T3i Group LLC. "While one can see the many benefits in combining a telephone with video and Internet content, the phone's price will be a key factor in our current economy."

Grandstream's GXV3140

Among the new school of multimedia phones is the GXV3140 IP Multimedia Phone (News - Alert) from Grandstream.

The 3140, which became available about a year ago and sells for \$249, targets both business and residential applications. It marries Web and social multimedia applications with IP video and voice calling, and comes with an integrated browser for one-touch access to Web sites. And it includes a 4.3-inch 480x272 digital color LCD and 1.3M (News - Alert) pixel camera with privacy shutter, a full-duplex speakerphone, support for nine languages, and peripheral support including TV-Out, USB, SD and more.

Among the more recent capabilities added to the SIP-based device is support for Skype.

"What it means is you have a phone that you can essentially hook up to any IP service provider out there... and you can have your Skype contacts and be able to make calls in a unified way," says Khris Kendrick, senior director of business development at Grandstream.

The device also has a built-in MCU to enable multipoint videoconferencing. And Kendrick adds that Grandstream's video surveillance devices can be accessed remotely using the 3140.

"There's going to be little distinction between some of these iPads and some of the Google (News - Alert) tablets and the [multimedia] phones that will come out," says Kendrick. "They all will look same – bigger, brighter displays, video is going to be a part of it."

While there is clearly a strong market for the iPad and iPhone, Kendrick says: “Some folks will want expensive/iconic gear. Other folks will want stuff that’s always on and always ready to go.”

WorldGate’s Ojo Vision

Another new multimedia phone comes from WorldGate, which is targeting the device squarely at the residential user.

The \$99 Ojo Vision includes a 7-inch screen that displays full-screen video, and can be used for videoconferencing or as a digital picture frame, if you plug a camera into it. (In the future, WorldGate expects to bring other video Web services, such as multimedia advertising, home control features and the like, to device.) And users can plug their existing phones into the Ojo Vision for additional handsets in the house.

The device runs on a TI DaVinci dual core chip to deliver very high-quality audio and video, and it can adjust encoding based on the available bandwidth.

“Everybody is familiar with their Skype experiences and even seeing video streamed over their mobile phones, and they’ve almost become tolerant of their audio becoming unsynched from the picture, or there are dropouts in the audio, or a lot of jitter or blocks running across the picture,” says WorldGate CEO George Daddis. “It does not occur on our phone.”

To deliver a consistently high user experience, Daddis says WorldGate has elected to deliver the Ojo Vision as part of a turnkey solution that also includes services, which will be generally available for \$29.99 per month starting in the third or fourth quarter of this year.

“We will sell the complete package to any kind of marketing or direct sales firm or any agent working on our behalf who would like a recurring revenue business but doesn’t have any experience in telephony,” he says. “We offer a complete network, billing package, product fulfillment – everything you need, literally, from stem to stern.”

Polycom's VVX 1500

While WorldGate is focused exclusively at the residential set, Polycom is all business. And the latter company entered the business media phone space a little over a year ago with its VVX 1500.

Tim Yankey, senior director of product marketing at Polycom, explains that this product brings technology business-grade telephony and video with a unique application platform.

The VVX 1500, which is list priced starting at \$1,099, comes bundled with several applications including the Polycom Productivity Suite, which enables users to initiate and control audio conference calls from the device's screen and record calls locally using a flash drive in the phone's USB port. Users can access a free Web service, called My Info Portal, to receive content such as local weather reports and other personalized information when the screen would otherwise be idle.

It also features an open API and microbrowser that enable third-party application developers to integrate with it business applications such as unified communications, customer relationship management, and appointment management systems. The always-on, touch-screen user interface includes a menu screen on which developers can place icons for users to locate and start their applications.

And now the device can talk both SIP and H.323, which of course allows it to communicate with both SIP and H.323 endpoints.

"The reception to this product has been fantastic," Yankee says, adding that the device has been embraced by businesses of various sizes, as well as by service providers leveraging it to deliver unified communications to the SMBs.

snom's 870

Another leading business device company, snom, also plays in the multimedia phone space.

Its top-of-the-line product is a 12-line phone with a color touch screen, one-button access to chosen URLs, and application integration capabilities that lists for just \$349.

The company touts the 870's well-arranged address book, which makes sure that each caller can be quickly identified; its integration with Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 via snom's special firmware; and its wideband audio with silence suppression and voice activity detection features.

"Our phones all do XML, so the next step in this is we going to see applications flow to the IP desk phone like the 870," says Mike Storella, snom's director of business development for the Americas. "That's where the value-add is for an IP phone is to have business applications. I don't see many applications, interestingly enough, like the iPhone model; it's more about IT guys and telco guys saying 'Oh, I can help my company out by getting integrated back-room operations to the phone or the desktop.'"

Storella adds that the company also offers a side car device, called the snom Vision, which includes 16 buttons and its own screen, that was designed to work with 821 and 870. It's aimed for use by receptionists or others, like management personnel, who control or want to be able to watch activity on the communications system.

Now's the Time

So what's happening now that signal such multimedia desktop or countertop devices are finally ready for mass acceptance? We've all been hearing about the potential of videophones for years. In fact, WorldGate's Daddis mentions that AT&T (News - Alert) unveiled the first videophone at the World's Fair back in the 1960s.

According to Daddis, such devices are close to reaching a tipping point now because broadband access is widespread, the cost points for such devices have come within reach of more users, high-tech types are putting a new focus on ease-of-use in this area, and there's a strong desire for many of the applications these products can deliver.

The fact that residential and business users also have become very comfortable with video through their mobile phones, laptops and table computers might also be a contributing factor.

"We anticipate that within [four] years, nearly 10 million business media phones will be shipped worldwide, generating more than U.S. \$3 billion in annual revenue. They are a key to the future of the IP PBX business," says Keith Nissen, principal analyst at In-Stat (News - Alert).

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