Business Services Industry

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Bellsouth, IBM unveil personal communicator phone

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ORLANDO, FLA.--"Mobile Communications Made Simple," marks the slogan for BellSouth's new Simon personal communicator that was unveiled here last week at the Wirless World conference. Designed by IBM, Simon looks and acts like a cellular phone but offers much more than voice communications. In fact, users can employ Simon as a wireless machine, a pager, an electronic mail device, a calendar, an appointment schedular, an address book, a calculator and a pen-based sketchpad--all at the suggested retail price of $899.

According to BellSouth Cellular Corp.'s product development manager Rich Guidotti, Simon represents the first real personal communicator because it was designed to be a cellular phone--a communications device--first, and a computer second. Other industry members attending the conference commented on the uniqueness of the BellSouth/IBM approach, saying it was the first time a company had placed a computer in a cellular phone, rather than placing a cellular phone in a computer.

...BellSouth Continues To Work on Various Data Projects

IBM and BellSouth jointly began developing the product last year after IBM displayed a prototype of its personal comunicator at the Comdex show, which sparked BellSouth executives' interest. The two companies based the final product on extensive market research.

BellSouth's personal communicator activities do not stop with IBM; the company currently is working with Apple to integrate cellular into the Newton device.

BellSouth's work with Apple is not affected by the new Simon, Guidotti said. Referring to the Newton as an electronic organizer and the Simon as a personal communicator, Guidotti added: "No one product fits everyone's needs."

IBM plans to be busy developing products during the next few months; the company "still plans to enter the PDA [personal digital assistant] market in 1994," said Al Testani, IBM's general manager of Peripheral Products. The wireless computing market will involve a "spectrum of devices," he said, calling Simon a "voice-intensive device."

"There will also be data-intensive devices; we plan to enter that [market] later," he said.

...Simon's Features

Weighing in at a little more than a pound, the new personal communicator boasts a liquid crystal display (LCD) that offers a telephone keypad as well as a computer keypad. When used as a cellular phone, Simon offers standard cellular features, including a built in 9-1-1 emergency call button, last-number redial, last-10 numbers redial, address book auto-dial and roaming preference.

When using Simon as a personal communicator, customers can access the device's graphical user interface (GUI), which uses icons and on-line help screens to make the device more user -friendly. The phone has limited storage capabilities, which can be increased through a personal computer memory card international association (PCMCIA) slot.

In addition, the PCMCIA slot allows customers to add a paging card in order to receive electronic messages or value-added information services on a nationwide, regional or local basis, through MobileComm, BellSouth's paging company. Other slot features include: an organizer feature and a calendar, which can be updated automatically from a remote computer using the PCMCIA slot.

Even without the optional PCMCIA slot, Simon can send and receive E-mail through any Lotus cc:Mail post office that supports remote dial-in. When Simon is equipped with a PCMCIA add-on, messages can be received through most public E-mail systems.

...IBM Employs Different Technologies for Simon's Features

Using the standard Simon, customers can create faxesf and memos by using pen-touch screens or by writing directly on the screen, using a stylus. When customers send faxes, their handwriting will be reflected exaclty--not digitized to look like a printed word-using a technology called pen annotation.

Offering fax capabilities via users' own handwriting will relieve the frustration of dealing with the current imperfect handwriting recognition technology.

"You don't have to learn how to rewrite to use this product," Guidotti said. However, BellSouth is not ruling out the possibility of using handwriting-recognition technology in future generations of Simon, he continued.

For those applications where typing is necessary, such as E-mail, the phone's LCD screen displays a complete computer keyboard. For users who prefer larger letters, Simon offers a patented IBM technology called predictive keyboard.

With this technology, only a portion of the keyboard is displayed on the LCD screen. After a user selects a letter, the computer predicts the next letters the user most likely will choose and displays those on the screen.

The phone currently is based on an AMPS standard, but as cellular digital packet data (CDPD) networks come on line, IBM and BellSouth most likely will develop a CDPD phone, said IBM's Testani.

IBM granted BellSouth exclusive U.S. distribution rights to Simon. Pending FCC approval, BellSouth plans to introduce Simon in Orlando, Daytona Beach, Jacksonville and Melbourne, Fla., in December. A phased rollout will move Simon into other BellSouth markets by March 1994, with a nationwide distribution targeted by April.