

Technology Industry

0 Comments

Simon sends - Simon PDA from BellSouth Cellular - Hardware Review - Evaluation

Home Office Computing, Feb, 1995 by John R. Quain

Rating: * * 1/2 Simon List Price: \$899 (\$59 in BellSouth's calling region, including cellular activation) Manufacturer: Mitsubishi/IBM for BellSouth Cellular, (800) 746-6672 No computer product category has been more ridiculed than the PDA. Originally conceived as a tiny digital factotum that would call home, receive faxes, store documents, and send e-mail, the first PDAs from AT&T, Apple, Casio, and Tandy fell far short of expectations.

Some didn't include wireless communications, and some were underpowered. All were too heavy and unable to consistently interpret even the most meticulous handwriting. Rethinking the original PDA, BellSouth presents the \$899 Simon--a more modest, more satisfactory PDA.

Simon looks like an early cellular phone with a small built-in LCD touch screen. Weighing in at 18 ounces and measuring 8 by 2.5 by 1.5 inches, it's heavier and bulkier than today's ultralight cellular phones. But with a few caveats, Simon allows you to take notes, look up addresses, send and receive faxes and e-mail--as well as make cellular calls just as you normally would.

Simon can't perform handwriting recognition, so you enter information using a scratchpad or by tapping on an onscreen keyboard with a special stylus (your finger will also work, but don't use a pen). The DOS-based, custom-designed software includes a calendar, appointment scheduler, to-do list, address book, world clock, calculator, and notepad/sketchpad. It's enough to keep important basic information at hand, but you can't store standard Word or Excel files without the optional PC connectivity kit (\$149).

To manage its multiple functions, Simon uses a microprocessor with both 1MB of ROM (read-only memory) and 1MB of PSRAM (pseudo-static random-access memory). The latter holds all your valuable information.

Simon's included NiCad battery lasts about eight hours in standby mode and about one hour under constant use. When the battery goes completely dead, a supplied charger will restore it overnight (an additional slim battery is also included for free). Without the NiCad battery, an internal lithium battery will keep all the information safe for just over two days; after that, it's gone, so you need to keep Simon charged.

Toting Simon around for a few days, we found its cell phone to be on a par with standard models available elsewhere. Voice quality was quite good, and the ergonomics of the phone itself proved to be very congenial. In many ways it's more convenient than using a regular cell phone. The onscreen 16-number speed dialer, the display of the last 10 numbers you dialed, and Simon's full-featured address book are particularly handy assets.

Simon is too heavy and a bit too big to fit in a jacket pocket, however. Furthermore, in sunlight, even though you can adjust brightness and contrast, the side-lit screen can be hard to read. And if you leave it in the sun for an hour or more, the screen begins to misbehave by displaying dark blocks that make it unreadable (after about 20 minutes under shelter, Simon returns to normal).

Creating an 8.5-by-11-inch paper fax on Simon's tiny screen can also be tricky. The LCD screen measures only about 5 by 1.5 inches, so scribbling out a full-page diagram takes a steady hand. Generally, you're better off using one of the onscreen keypads to type out a message.

To send or receive e-mail, you need a Lotus cc:Mail post office that supports remote dialing. But if you must connect with, say, CompuServe, you're out of luck; Simon doesn't include a basic communications package that supports online services (for \$249, however, you can purchase a MobilComm PCMCIA card that provides access to e-mail from online services). And you can't use Simon with your notebook.

It may be that we're still asking too much of PDAs. For example, how can you possibly fit an acceptably large touch screen on an object that's supposed to fit in your pocket? Still, we're used to eventually getting what we want. So far, Simon comes the closest to meeting our PDA desires. CIRCLE 112 ON READER SERVICE CARD

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