

The un-iPhone

NOT since the launch of Apple's iPhone last year has the unveiling of a handset caused such a stir. On September 23rd T-Mobile, a mobile operator owned by Germany's Deutsche Telekom, presented its new phone, the G1, which is made by HTC, a Taiwanese manufacturer. The reason for the buzz is that the device is the first to be based on software called Android, made by Google, the largest internet company.

The phone naturally invites comparisons to the iPhone, still the most elegant "smartphone" on the market today. But that is to focus on the wrong thing. It is not the features or design that matter, since the two phones aim at different users. Rather, it is what each phone is likely to do for the industry as a whole. The iPhone, for its part, has demonstrated that consumers do and will use mobile phones to search, browse and otherwise use the internet. Vendors of other smartphones, such as RIM, the maker of the BlackBerry, are now racing to match the iPhone in usability. As they do so, mobile-internet usage is rising steeply.

Yet fancy smartphones account for less than 15% of the handset market, says Kevin Burden at ABI Research, a consultancy. Most consumers, using simpler phones that the industry confusingly calls "feature phones", are not going online while on the move. These are the people that Google is targeting.

Android-based phones will be cheaper than existing smartphones. But the more fundamental difference harkens back to the mid-1980s, when the PC era was dawning and two rival operating systems—from Apple and Microsoft—competed to become the dominant platform for which software companies would write programs. Something similar is now happening with phones, all of which will become "smart".

Most mobile operators and handset-makers are searching for a platform for their mass-market phones of the future. Many have warmed to Linux, a free, open-source operating system which can be customised. Some are tweaking Linux to make their own flavours. Google's Android is also a variant of Linux.

Google hopes that other operators and handset-makers—South Korea's Samsung and LG appear to be next—will adopt Android to save themselves the expense of developing their own software. It also hopes that programmers will write fun software for Android, making it as ubiquitous as Microsoft Windows became in the PC era (but has failed to become on phones). Its aim is not to challenge Apple or Microsoft. Instead Google, which makes money from online advertising, will be happy as long as nobody locks up the market and people do ever more Google searches, on all their devices.

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