

What the new iPhone probably won't include (but should)



AS THE futurologist Paul Saffo likes to observe, most ideas take 20 years to become an overnight success. The basic technology is often worked out, but without someone to champion it, it spreads only slowly. Then, eventually, a big company takes the technology in question and builds it into its products, thus endorsing the idea and giving it scale. Suddenly, it takes off. It seems to be an overnight success, but it has actually taken much longer than that to reach the mainstream.

Over the years Apple has blessed several technologies in this way and brought them to a mass audience: the graphical user interface with the Mac, the digital music player with the iPod, mobile internet-browsing and multi-touch screens with the iPhone, tablet computers with the iPad. In each case there were previous examples of the technology, but Apple showed how it should be done, and it then took off. There's another such technology that has been around for several years and is ready for lift-off; it just needs the endorsement of a big company like Apple to make it happen. The technology in question is "near-field communication" (NFC) chips, which can be used to make contactless payments, among other things.

If you use a contactless card as your office pass or public-transport ticket (prominent examples are Octopus in Hong Kong and Oyster in London) then you'll already be familiar with the basic idea: you hold the card near a reader (I keep my Oyster card inside my wallet) and the ticker barrier opens. There are also contactless credit cards in several markets (though not very many retailers accept them yet), and contactless key fobs, using the same technology, which let you pay for petrol with a swipe. This technology has been slowly spreading for years.

What an NFC chip does, however, is enable a mobile phone to emulate one of these contactless cards. The phone is then able to replace a wallet-full of such cards, and accompanying software on the phone lets you check the balance on your rail pass, for example. This is in fact commonplace in Japan, where thousands of people routinely use their mobile phones as their railway tickets, and renew their tickets right on their phones, using the

phone's mobile-internet connection. For a while this was easily the biggest mobile-commerce application on Earth.

All the nuts and bolts have been worked out, in other words. But the technology is still stuck in the starting blocks. The banks were pushing contactless credit cards quite hard in some parts of the world a couple of years ago, but the financial crisis has understandably distracted them. Handset-makers such as Nokia have also produced handsets with NFC support, but if only one or two phones in the line-up support NFC, that's not enough phones to encourage retailers, railway companies and so on to adopt the technology.

If Apple announced that every iPhone would henceforth support NFC, however, then the picture would change overnight. There would be a flood of apps to support the emulation of various contactless cards. Within a few months there would be a critical mass of tech-savvy users willing to adopt the technology, giving retailers, banks and other companies the confidence to pile in. And iPhones are quite expensive handsets, with relatively price-insensitive buyers, so nobody would really notice the small added cost of an NFC chip.

Understandably, given that it makes perfect sense, there have been persistent rumours that Apple might be thinking of putting NFC chips into the next iPhone, which is due to be announced on June 7th. Tellingly, the company has filed a couple of NFC-related patents. But the next-generation iPhones that have escaped into the wild in recent weeks, and have then been taken apart, do not seem to include the technology. Moreover, Apple has approved an iPhone case, made by DeviceFidelity, that includes an NFC chip connected via the dock connector, and which then talks to an app on the phone. I doubt Apple would do that if it were about to announce direct support for the technology itself; but perhaps it's a bluff to divert attention from plans to do just that. On balance, though, I don't expect the new fourth-generation iPhone HD, or whatever it is called, to include NFC. But perhaps the fifth-generation one will?

UPDATE: So, Steve Jobs has spoken, and there is no NFC in the new iPhone 4. It does have a better camera, a better screen, a faster chip with better battery life, a clever new case design, HD video recording (uh-oh, Flip), iBooks support and so forth. But NFC will just have to wait until iPhone 5, it seems.

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