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The Awkward Smart Phone Grows Up

By David Pogue

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AND now, another episode of gadgetry's long-running corporate soap opera, "As the Palm Turns."

Previously on "A.P.T.": In Season 1 (1996), Palm Computing developed the smash-hit Pilot organizer. The company was swallowed by U.S. Robotics, which in turn was snapped up by 3Com. Frustrated, Palm's founders resigned and founded the rival Handspring. 3Com then spun out Palm as an independent entity once again, whereupon it soon split into two companies, PalmOne (hardware) and PalmSource (software), and PalmOne acquired the ailing Handspring.

In the latest exciting installment, PalmOne has bought back the name Palm from the struggling PalmSource, whose future is in doubt. By year's end, PalmOne will once again be called Palm, making you wonder if the whole thing was a nine-year-long dream.

Now, if you watch Seasons 6 through 9 closely on DVD, you'll see a minor character gradually rise to prominence: the Treo smart phone, introduced by Handspring in 2002. From the very beginning, the name reflected the Treo's triple goal: to combine an organizer, a cellphone and a pocket Internet terminal with as few compromises as possible. More than 1.7 million have been sold.

With its string of marriages and divorces behind it -- at least for now -- Palm has realized that the Treo is its future. The market for stand-alone organizers is cooling, so Palm has announced that it is "shifting its emphasis to the smart phone space."

The latest model, the Treo 650, made its debut last November. Most reviewers praised it, but not everyone was excited. For one thing, it was available only from Sprint and, later, Cingular; Verizon's 40 million customers were stuck with the aging Treo 600 model. For another, the 650 was supposed to offer Bluetooth, a wireless technology that lets the cellphone act as a sort of Internet modem for your laptop. But Sprint and Cingular disabled that aspect of Bluetooth.

Finally, there was a problem with the Treo's memory. It's a special kind that doesn't erase all your data when the Treo's battery dies (unlike most previous Palms), which is good. Unfortunately, the new memory format had a side effect: each tidbit of information took

up a huge amount of storage. An 80-kilobyte address book could balloon to 334 kilobytes on the Treo 650. Many who upgraded from the Treo 600 to the 650 found that their programs and data would no longer fit.

It must be the sweeps season, because in the last few weeks, all three of those plot twists have finally been resolved. In May, Verizon finally made its own Treo 650 available (\$400 with a two-year commitment). Then, two weeks ago, Sprint released a software patch that unlocked the Bluetooth laptop-dialing feature.

Finally, Palm solved the memory problem. The new software, installed on all current Treos (including Verizon's), reduces the size of each appointment or address-book entry from 512 bytes to 32, making the phone's 23 megabytes of memory much more efficient and thrilling the S.P.R.B.A. (Society of People With Really Big Address Books). If you have an older Sprint Treo (or an "unlocked" Treo -- one that can be used with any G.S.M. carrier), you can download an updater from palm.com; a similar updater for Cingular Treos is on the way.

So now the Treo 650, once a gawky adolescent, is all grown up and firing on all cylinders. How does it hold up against its younger, more aggressive rivals?

Purely in terms of its feature list, the Treo is no longer state of the art. It doesn't have Wi-Fi wireless networking, so you can't hop onto Internet hot spots at airports and coffee shops. Nor can it get online at the near-cable-modem speed of Verizon's BroadbandAccess network, as the expensive new Samsung i730 can.

The Treo's digital camera takes better pictures than its predecessor, but they're puny by today's standards. At 0.3 megapixels, they have enough resolution for sharing on the screen, but not for printing.

The Treo's Bluetooth feature still isn't fully realized, either. It communicates with Bluetooth wireless earpieces, and it can wirelessly synchronize data with a Mac or PC. But Cingular and Verizon still don't let you use the phone as a wireless laptop modem, and the Treo still can't communicate with the built-in Bluetooth audio systems of some recent car models, including the Toyota Prius.

Then again, some consumers are beginning to realize there's more to life than long feature lists. (Look at the BlackBerry, a Treo rival. It doesn't have a camera, Wi-Fi or Blue-tooth, but that hasn't deterred its three million subscribers worldwide.)

It turns out that Treo 650 succeeds because of something that doesn't, and can't, show up on any feature list: spit and polish. The thought and cleverness that have gone into this device's design put most other smart phones to shame.

You could argue, for example, that core cellphone features like battery life, sound quality and simplicity trump Wi-Fi and high-res photos any day. Sure enough, the Treo's removable battery is good for five hours of talk time and an amazing 12 days of standby. The sound is excellent, and there's even a speakerphone.

The Treo looks great, too, and its smooth, solid-feeling body fits comfortably in your hand. It's much more compact than a BlackBerry, too, so people will be much less likely to think you're talking into a Pop-Tart.

At 320 by 320 pixels, the bright, gorgeous color screen offers higher resolution than most rivals, meaning supersharp (if tiny) text and graphics. It's also a touch screen -- a skinny stylus tucks into the back of the phone -- which is handy if you install any of the thousands of Palm-compatible programs available online. You won't need the stylus, though, when you operate the Treo's built-in software; it's all been beautifully designed for one-handed operation, which is another awfully nice feature to have in a phone.

It's probably hard to imagine getting much writing done with the Treo's tiny thumb-driven keyboard; the keys are the size of partly dissolved Tic Tacs. But you'd be surprised. The keys light up very brightly, they're placed just right, and the tops are rounded to minimize double-pressing by fat thumbs. The software assists in every possible way, too, auto-capping sentences, auto-inserting apostrophes and auto-switching to number-typing mode when dialing or typing in phone numbers.

The 650 has a reasonably speedy Web browser, and when it comes to e-mail, the Treo practically out-BlackBerries the BlackBerry. Corporations can buy any of several "push" e-mail programs, meaning your Treo gets messages as they arrive, instead of having to check at regular intervals. These programs also offer wireless synching; when you delete or file a message on the phone, it's instantly deleted or filed on your PC at work.

If your name doesn't end in Inc., you have other options. You can set up the Treo to check your regular e-mail account every 15 minutes, for example. Or you can sign up for services from Verizon, Sprint, Visto or Yahoo that offer variations on that same real-time, wireless synching. That way, you get all the joy of corporate BlackBerry ownership without having either a BlackBerry or a corporation.

The Treo really shines, though, in the little touches that bear the pawprints of obsessive-compulsive designers. For example, it offers to add a newly dialed number to the address book, so you'll have it for next time. You can also assign a different ring to each caller, and, on any Treo except Sprint's, even record new ring tones of your own. (Your spouse's ring can be, "Honey, it's me!")

You can look up a number in a thousand-name address book just by typing the person's initials -- and then dial with one key press. And the Treo's physical Ringer Off switch is so brilliant and useful, it ought to become an F.C.C. requirement.

The Treo is not entirely compromise-free; some might consider a two-inch-wide keyboard, for example, to be the very definition of a compromise. But it's safe to say that the Treo 650 comes closer to its original "no compromises" goal than anything yet designed.

Will the next Treo offer broadband-speed Internet connections? Will the Treo ever make a substantial dent in the BlackBerry market? Will Palm find ever more convoluted ways to split, merge, separate and re-form?

Stay tuned. This show has been renewed for next season.

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