GADGETS

Happy Birthday, Palm Pilot

There were PDAs before the Palm Pilot, but none so popular or genre-defining. As the Pilot celebrates its 10th birthday, MSNBC.com's Gary Krakow takes a fond look back.

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— The original. The one that started the PDA craze. The one and only –Palm Pilot. Palm

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By Gary Krakow

It was nearly ten years ago that I first stepped foot into a new job at something called MSNBC.com.

I had been a television news producer at WNBC-TV in New York and decided to make the leap and try a new field – the Internet. I brought with me a brand-new electronic gadget, one that I had described to my TV viewers a few weeks earlier.

If you've ever been in a newsroom you'll know that journalists are a very inquisitive bunch – especially when it comes to brand new, cool-looking gadgets. One by one, people at my new job came over to my desk to ask what this little device was. I told them it was a Palm Pilot – an electronic organizer. Most nodded their heads as if they understood. Some did get it – but said they preferred their Filofax books.

In the ten years that followed Palm has sold nearly 30 million Pilots and their successors. Not just to journalists but to people from all walks of life, from gadget geeks to teenage girls, blue collar workers and white-collar executives.

The original Palm Pilot was announced in January and released in late March, 1996. It wasn't the first electronic organizer to hit the market. I'm still trying to forget my Sharp Wizard, a model with the keys in alphabetical order instead of QWERTY. And the term PDA (personal digital assistant) was actually coined to describe the Apple Newton.

The Palms were different, however. They were well thought out, well designed and a huge hit.

Then and now

Those first units were unbelievably basic compared to what's available today. The original Pilot sported just 128 kilobytes (yes, children, that's *kilo*bytes) of memory along with a 16 MHz Motorola 68328 processor. It had a 160 x 160 pixel monochrome touch screen and ran on two AAA batteries.

Palm's latest PDA/smart phone, the Treo 700, by comparison, has 128 megabytes of memory (60MB user accessible), a 312MHz Intel XScale processor and a 240 x 240 pixel 16-bit color

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screen, capable of producing more than 65,000 colors. Power comes from a removable, rechargeable lithium-ion battery.

One thing that hasn't changed much over the years is the size, which remains the right size and shape to fit neatly into a pocket. The original Pilot weighed 5.7 ounces and measured 3.2 by 4.3 by 0.7 inches. The Treo 700 weighs 6.4 ounces and measures 2.3 by 4.4 by 0.9 inches.

One of the reasons the original Pilot was so popular was its ability to easily synchronize information with desktop computers. You connected the PDA to a PC or Mac via a serial port and then used the Palm Desktop Software to HotSync your information. The latest Treo can connect via a USB cord or wirelessly using Bluetooth or the Verizon EV-DO high-speed wireless network.

Among the software back then: Address Book, Date Book, To Do List, Memo Pad, Calculator, Expense and Games. The Treo 700, of course, comes with software that will let you take photos and video, surf the Web, open and work on Office documents, send text and multimedia messages, use voice commands and play your favorite tunes and videos.

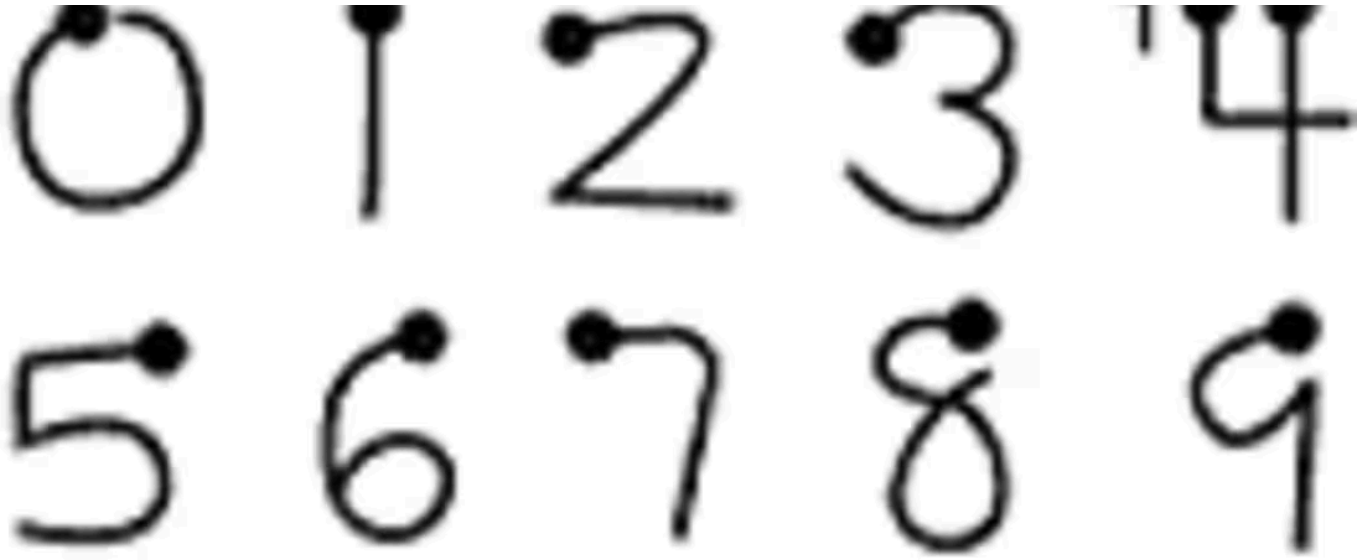
Here’s my favorite part – the original Palm Pilot had a manufacturer’s suggested retail price of $299. Today’s modern-day, mega-feature Treo 700 PDA/smart phone can be purchased for as little as $399. And less sophisticated versions can be had for even less.

Look Ma, no keyboard!

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One of the main reasons for the original Pilot's success was the clever data input system. Palm's engineers realized that typing with your thumbs on small keyboards was silly.

So, they found an elegant solution – an alphabet shortcut language called Graffiti. It takes a few minutes to learn and an hour or so to master. Unlike some earlier attempts at handwriting recognition, it's also pretty accurate. Ten years later, there are still Palm fanatics who can scribble Graffiti faster than I can type on those new-fangled miniature keypads.

For the record, my favorite Palm of all time was the Palm VII, which debuted in 1999. It was their first device with a built-in wireless modem. It allowed you to connect to the brand new PalmNet – one of the first pay-for wireless Internet services. It was kind of funky by today's standards (it took quite a long time for the wireless modem to charge itself from each new set of AAA batteries) but it worked like a charm.

I will never forget hearing an old favorite song as I was boarding a Continental flight. While others were getting on I opened my Palm VII, flipped up the antenna (which turned the wireless modem on) and ordered the album from Amazon.com. The CD was waiting for me when I got home from my trip.

Today's Palms can connect to nearly every kind of network in your home and office, including high-speed cell phone data networks. And as for storage, there's one current Palm model, the Life Drive, which comes with a 4GB hard drive. That's up there in iPod territory.

What's next? I think Palms will continue to add features that people want and need. I expect more and more sophisticated devices – probably with cell phones which can connect to every wireless network it sees – including VoIP telephony features.

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I also expect the amount of built-in storage to increase. I'd like to see a 4GB hard drive (or larger) inside a Treo smart phone. I want to carry one device which allows me to do everything I need to do when I'm on the run.

If anyone can do it, it's Palm. Congratulations to everyone involved. Happy birthday! I hope you have many, many more.

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