



Nokia 9000 Communicator (left) and Nokia E7 Communicator / Wikipedia

The Gadget We Miss: The Nokia 9000 Communicator

Nokia's first Smartphone was a ground-breaking gadget for the traveller



Richard Baguley

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The evolution of the modern smartphone is a complex business, with numerous extinct species that never quite made it. Some of these were just plain odd, and others were just before their time. The Nokia 9000 Communicator was one of these, a cell phone that was a smartphone before the word was invented. It rolled all of the features of a computer into a phone, putting email, web browsing, fax, word processing and spreadsheets into a single pocketable device. And it did it years before Blackberry became the iconic symbol of the mobile professional.



The Nokia 9000 Communicator in its open configuration / [AllAboutSymbian](#)

Launched in 1996, the Nokia 9000 Communicator showed a company at the peak of its design powers: the Communicator was a mobile powerhouse, with 8MB of memory and a 33MHz processor. This combination ran Nokia's own GEOS operating system (a predecessor to the Symbian OS used on later models), combined with a suite of business programs that could read and edit Microsoft Office files from a desktop PC. Inside the clamshell style case was a chiclet QWERTY keyboard, complete with function keys for the major features and a series of programmable buttons by the screen. This screen was a black and white LCD, with a then-high resolution of 640 x 200 pixels. This long, thin screen meant that it could offer a first: a graphical web browser on a mobile device.



Nokia marketed the 9000 Communicator to business users, as you can tell from this ad featuring a business dude intent on leveraging the paradigm to maximize shareholder return / Nokia

Previous phones had offered only text web browsing, but the 9000 Communicator could render graphics in all their monochrome glory and connect to the Internet over the built-in 9600 bits per second GSM modem, which worked with the new digital GSM phone networks that were being rolled out across the world. However, this was before the days of always-on connections: to get your email, you had to connect to the mobile network,

rather like dialing up on a land line, but without the noises. The US model was launched in 1997 (the Nokia 9000i Communicator), running on the GSM 1900 frequency offered by carriers like Microcell in Canada.



The 9000 Communicator in its closed position, with dialing keypad and secondary screen. Note the GSM antenna on the top. / [Wikimedia Commons](#)

All of these features added bulk, though: the 9000 Communicator was over 1.5 inches thick and weighed a hefty 14oz (397 grams). Compare that with a contemporary phone like the Motorola StarTAC that weighed just 3.1 ounces, and which was half an inch thick.

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The screen was also not very easy to see in sunlight, with the low-contrast LCD screen getting blasted out by even moderate sun.



The Nokia 9000 Communicator was a rather chunky 1.5 inches thick / PureViewClub.com

But the real problem was the price. It cost at least \$800 in the USA, and about £1000 in the UK. That price scared off many users, as did the bulk and complexity of the device. To be successful, the technology had to wait several years to get smaller, sleeker and to be easier to use. Former Nokia CEO Jorma Ollila told the Wall Street Journal that *“we had exactly the right view of what it was all about... We were about five years ahead.”*



The diminishing size of Nokia Communicators from 1996 to 2004. From left: Nokia 9000, 9110i, 9210i, 9300 and 9500 / [Sergio Oliviera](http://SergioOliviera)

Nokia came out with several revisions of the Communicator over the next few years, adding a color screen, slimming the unit down and updating the

operating system. These sold well in Europe, but the Communicator remained more of a niche product in the USA, as Nokia struggled to get the dominant carriers to sell their phones. Models such as the 9300 Communicator were available in the US, but the reluctance of the US networks to switch over to the dominant GSM standard (or Nokia's reluctance to support the US standards, depending on your perspective) meant that they were relatively expensive and slow. The last Communicator model was the E90, released in 2007, which was only available in the US as an import. This sported a full color screen, 128GB of RAM and 4GB of storage space. It was also much lighter than the 9000 Communicator, weighing just 7.4oz.



The Nokia E90, the last Communicator, released in 2007 / [GSMArena](http://www.GSMArena.com)

The reason that we miss the 9000 Communicator is that it was the first of its type, a genre defining smartphone that existed before the word was coined. It was the first device to offer the heady combination of keyboard, good screen and business and Internet software in one simple package. And it was a product ahead of its time: modern users take features like mobile email and web browsing for granted, but the Nokia 9000 Communicator was the first device to offer these in a single device. It may have been a bulky, clunky device, but we still miss it.

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You can relive the thrill of unpacking a new Nokia 9000 Communicator at [PureViewClub](http://PureViewClub.com). Models also show up frequently on [eBay](http://eBay.com), especially UK, European and International models.



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