



Work smarter with a smarter phone

With today's technology
it's easier than ever for
real estate professionals
to stay connected

By Matthew J. Ferrara



hat's smarter than a fancy new PDA or a cool cell phone? Both devices merged into one! Welcome to the world of *smartphones*. For the last few years, this exciting sector of technology has delivered on the promise of small, multifunction devices to make the mobile professional's life on the road easier. The latest smartphones have come a long way from their humble beginnings: Early Blackberry devices appeared more than a decade ago, basic contact management features like a database and calendar were merged with a wireless email "pager" and, most importantly, a mini keyboard. As more personal digital assistants (PDAs) from Palm and Microsoft hit the scene, it became obvious that convergence with cellular phones was the future.

And, the race to create the ultimate "Swiss Army Knife" of personal productivity continues today, with Apple's iPhone challenging our very concept of what a phone should do. Whether it's the trend-setting Treo or the super-small Blackberry Pearl, smartphones are changing the way real estate agents do business today.

Smartphones come in a variety of shapes and sizes, features and options. Slimmer models are aimed at mobile managers who need contact management and email, but few other fringe benefits. Almost all feature a convenient keyboard to accommodate email, instant messaging and text messaging, as well as taking notes, entering data and surfing the web. Prices range from \$99 (with rebates and new contracts) to over \$600 for cutting edge models, so making the right choice depends upon personal preference and mobility goals.

What makes a smart phone just so smart? Essentially, smartphones combine the critical features of your laptop with the ultimate service: wireless Internet. The idea is to take the critical pieces of laptop computing – like your calendar, database, notes and email into a form-factor that makes that information conveniently accessible. Add the latest goodies like instant messaging, a digital camera and GPS mapping,

and you end up with is a cell phone with a device that eliminates the need to carry and manage multiple gadgets for common tasks.

To determine which smart phone is right for you, consider how you work. The most important decision in smartphone selection is the choice of *operating system*. There are basically four choices: Palm, Microsoft, Apple and Blackberry operating systems. New users may not have a preference if they haven't worked with a previous, basic PDA; so go to the store and try each one out to see what seems easiest to learn for you. Also, many agents may have specific requirements from their MLS or brokerage email systems that "require" them to select a certain operating system, so be sure to check with third-parties like your email provider or lockbox company.

Depending upon operating system, your smartphone will come with a set of applications (address book, calendar, calculator) and will have varying ability to add third-party software applications. For real estate professionals who wish to use their smart phone to access MLS, common franchise intranets or third party software (like Top Producer), first determine if those software programs can be installed on your potential selection. There is no single answer to the operating system question: the best bet is to make a list of applications you might like to have on your smart phone (and remember, it's not a laptop) and then check to see what system is required, will nar-

row the list of potential models.

The most important and exciting feature in smartphones is email access. For most users, that's the "vital" attraction of smartphones. In most cases, setting up your email will be a piece of cake: users will find their smartphones ready to accept pop- and web-based email settings out of the box. In some cases where a brokerage or agent uses *Microsoft Exchange* based email, a change on the server or a software license may need to be purchased for the smartphone to be authorized to receive the messages. Some smartphones use their own software to manage email – such as the Blackberry's basic but fast software. Others, like Pocket PC devices actually come with *mini Outlook* program built in, looking very much as if you were using your laptop but with scaled back advanced features. In almost every case, the software requires minimal training – creating and replying to messages can be learned in about five minutes. And you can usually purchase more sophisticated software to load into most smartphones, from websites like PalmGear.com or Crackberry.com Since you will be using the email application constantly, some users may prefer to actually try the software on a demo phone at a local store. Evaluate how the application organizes folders, displays text and especially handles attachments. While you're probably not going to download a 5 MB video file wirelessly on your smartphone, you will want to ensure it can open common word processing files and spreadsheets. Most other attachment types, such as Adobe PDFs and photo files like JPG and GIF can be universally accessed on every device.

To maximize your smartphone's value, purchase memory expansion like a 2 or 4 GB media card. Most models include a slot that can accommodate any of the inexpensive memory sticks available on the market today. Expanded memory is vital, and users should purchase as much as they can afford, which will likely run under \$50 for 4 GB. If you're

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going to use the smart phone to check email daily, carry your contact database and a few weeks of appointments, it's very likely you'll exceed the on-board memory within a few days use. With an extra large memory card, however, months of data storage should be no problem. And don't forget that most units will allow you to transfer files from your device to your laptop, freeing up valuable space and *backing up* data in a second place.

Let's not forget that smartphones are still, phones. Careful attention should be paid to the communications features for voice calls. For starters, make sure your smart phone includes *Bluetooth* technology. Bluetooth is a short-range wireless signal that connects your smart phone to useful accessories such as a cordless earpiece, your car's audio system (for safe driving) and even wireless printers. Some models even use Bluetooth to backup or transfer data between your smartphone and your laptop, eliminating the USB cord. Advanced text messaging should also be stan-

dard – not for emails but for those quick phone-to-phone messages that road warriors get from their friends, assistants or office staff.

Since the smartphone is always connected to the cellular network, it is therefore always connected to the internet. This is where smartphones get space-age. Instant messaging software like Yahoo or AOL can be run on most smartphones, creating a connection between clients using their computers at work and busy agents on the road. IM applications can manage many conversations at once, facilitating availability to multiple clients. With IM, agents can communicate as fast as text messaging but with more words, send hyperlinks and store a log of all chats for documentation purposes. Instant messaging is a powerful way to have a constant presence online, through the cellular network, for those consumers who need to communicate with you in a convenient manner that you can respond to – oftentimes when you prefer to type and not talk, such as in a restau-

rant or elevator.

Of course, the place smartphones are making the most progress – especially in their quest to replace laptops for day-to-day work – is in web browsing. Bright, clear and fairly large screens can browse the internet and display websites in close-to-normal layouts. Agents who need to check listings or neighborhood maps can simply look them up on the company website, with no special software required. News and finance sites may strip away some of their graphics but their articles, blogs and alerts can be read, saved and even bookmarked. For the most impact, browsing video clips and virtual tours on your smartphone can be a great tool for working with buyers or checking out a new listing before driving across town to see it.

Finally, the best part: the monthly bill. Contrary to popular belief, most smartphones will actually *save you money* each month. While most users will add a \$50 *data plan* to their current bills, they will soon find that they are talking less, so they can lower their peak *voice minutes* by the same amount. And while that sounds like you'd be "even" in terms of the monthly bill, consider this: The real money savings comes in *time*, since you can respond to emails throughout the day – a few minutes here and there. Smartphones help you handle email in real time, so you don't have to "add time" just to manage your messages after a busy day.

Great features, powerful opportunities and cost savings, that's what makes smartphones really smart! MAR



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