

Just say no to DoCoMo

ACCORDING to the Japanese communications giant NTT, its third generation mobile phone system (which goes under the embarrassingly infantile name of DoCoMo) is about to be launched. Apparently, by the end of 2002, this amazing new technology will allow us to download movies as well as music from the Internet.

I hope the executives of NTT will forgive me for being slightly underwhelmed by their technical breakthrough: the prospect of watching films on an approximately one-square inch screen leaves me entirely cold. It seems that this latest gadget from Japan will be able to do everything for us except polish our shoes, (but the NTT boffins are working on it). Cynics will say that as the corporation has sunk in over eight billion dollars in developing what is known as third generation mobile telephony, you would expect it to hype up this project.

I have little doubt that when the current bugs in the system are removed, millions of affluent people around the world will buy the new phones and be even more plugged in than they are now. However, let me warn NTT that I will not be queuing up for one. As it is, I have yet to master the capabilities and intricacies of my first generation mobile phone.

For instance, I know that it can store an amazing amount of names and telephone numbers, and I only have to scroll down to get the name I want to call. But the thought of punching in so much information on the tiny keys is tedious beyond

belief. So until I muster up the enthusiasm and the energy, I will continue using my phone book. And do you know what? It may not be high-tech, but it works amazingly well.

Another capability in my mobile phone that remains unused is its habit of showing who is calling as the number appears on the screen. And if I hadn't been lazy to programme my instrument with names and their numbers, it would have showed me who is calling as well. I suppose the idea is to let you decide whether to take the call or not. The problem is that I can't read the tiny numerals and letters on the screen without my reading glasses that are in a case. By the time I have put them on to see who is calling, the phone has stopped ringing. So I take the call regardless of who is at the other end.

Another confession I must make is that I regard mobile phones as intrusive nuisances. For instance, I think it is the height of bad manners to take or make a call during dinner. Nothing annoys me more at a restaurant than the shrill beeping of a cell phone, and the loud and inane conversation carried out over the phone on the table next to me makes me want to jab the offender with my fish fork. What can be more important than the enjoyment of good food in good company? If and when I start my own restaurant, I shall ban cell phones and well-done steaks.

But I don't want readers to get the impression that I am an anti-technology Luddite: I only feel that cell phones are convenient inventions that should not be allowed to take over our lives. Many young people I know seem to spend half their waking hours either chatting on

their phones or sending and receiving text messages on them. This last service, while convenient, requires sharp eyes and nimble fingers. Kids are highly adept at punching the little keys, but what are the messages they are so busy sending to the ends of the earth? In most cases, nothing more sensational than "R U OK?" As it is, our standards of spelling and grammar are plummeting; I fear that the advent of SMS (or 'short message service') will only accelerate this trend.

My high-tech son calls me "technologically challenged", but actually I have managed to keep up with recent developments. I just don't find them all particularly useful for my purposes. Take the so-called Personal Digital Assistants (or PDAs) as an example. These little gadgets can store an amazing amount of information relating to addresses, telephone numbers and appointments; in addition, you can tap in text, which can then be transferred, to your computer.

My son passed on his Psion to me when he was upgrading to a more sophisticated PDA, and I laboriously punched in scores of names and numbers into its memory, apart from typing in my appointments with its tiny keys. Somehow, I managed to erase its memory when I was changing its battery. That experience so scared me that I returned the machine to Shakir and have gone back to using my telephone book and my diary. So far, I have felt only relief at reverting to my low-tech ways.

While I am on the subject, let me also admit that I have yet to learn to programme my VCR to record from the TV in my absence. I know it has this capability because it's manual says so, but apart from never being sure when there will be

a power outage, I have never actually gone through the instruction book. Indeed, I suspect this to be true for most people of my generation. For me, life is too short to be fiddling about with tiny buttons and incomprehensible symbols on the off-chance that there will be electricity when my favourite TV programme is on.

My relationship with computers has been pretty ambivalent as well. While I have had a succession of them for 15 years and have a pretty good grasp of the technology, I have basically used them as glorified typewriters. And while I love e-mail, I only use my Internet to occasionally and quickly scan newspapers from India, Israel, France, the United States and the United Kingdom. I never "surf" or "chat." Even e-mail has its built-in traps: when you hit the 'delete' key, your messages are not deleted as you would expect, but moved to another folder. The geeks at Microsoft learned to their cost that incriminating memos can be retrieved when the famous trial was going on a couple of years ago.

All this leads me to believe that there are millions of us who do not use modern technology to anywhere near its full capability. There are probably trillions of unutilized bits and bytes out there in all kinds of electronic gadgets that you and I have paid for. My point is that the technologically challenged should have the option of buying 'lite' models that do not incorporate the features that Shakir's generation wants. Why should I have to pay for electronic memory and processing power I will never use?

Until that happens, let us just say no to DoCoMo.

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By Irfan Husain