

Get Smart

Why lug your laptop, PDA and cell phone around? A **smart phone** may be the single answer to your on-the-go tech needs. By Joseph C. Panettieri



► Industry insiders say smart phones, such as this Treo 600, are the next great multitasking must-have tools.

It's time to wave goodbye to traditional handheld computers and personal digital assistants (PDAs).

Across the country, savvy CRSs are making the switch to smart phones — which combine cell phones with personal organizer functionality.

"PDAs are on the way out," says **Dianne L. Davis, CRS**, at Prudential Henry & Burrows in Overland Park, Kan. Indeed, Davis has dumped her PDA in favor of a Treo 600 (about \$450 to \$550) from palmOne Inc. The Treo smart phone packs cellular, digital camera, organizer, Internet and e-mail capabilities into a single device. "I'm in love with my Treo," crows Davis. "Why would I carry two separate items when I have everything in one compact device?"

Many CRS pros are asking the same question. **Mark Porter, CRS**, with Keller Williams Realty in Plano, Texas, stops short of declaring PDAs dead, but he also has made the move to the Treo 600. Porter praises the device for its speed, generous digital memory, Internet connectivity and compatibility with multiple

cell-phone-service providers (AT&T, Cingular, Sprint, etc.). "I've got the power of a PDA, cell phone, digital camera and voice recorder all in one small package," says Porter, also a CRS Senior Instructor.

Davis and Porter have plenty of company. Real estate agents and other mobile professionals are increasingly discovering the advantages of smart phones and shifting their purchasing dollars away from PDAs. Sales of traditional handheld computers and PDAs fell roughly 8.5 percent to 11.35 million units last year, estimates International Data Corp. (IDC), a technology research firm in Framingham, Mass.

"Today's technology is all about convergence [and integrating] overlapping technologies into one compact device," Porter says.

Regardless of manufacturers' strategy, the market shift is a win-win for real estate agents. While "power users" trade up for stylish and robust smart phones, agents on tight budgets can buy deeply discounted PDAs from Palm for \$100 or less.



Reboot Your Tech Savvy

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▶ Plenty of power packed into a wallet-sized portable PC.

Big Promise, Small Design

Ten years after Bill Gates first described a world filled with "Wallet PCs," the devices are finally set to reach electronics-retailer store shelves.

Throughout 1994, Gates shared his vision for a "futuristic device" that would offer the PC's power and network connectivity in the palm of your hand. At the time, Gates described the device as a small, portable PC that would debut around 1999 or so.

Gates' timing was about five years off the mark, but his vision was right on target. By this fall, at least two companies — OQO of San Francisco and FlipStart of Seattle — will introduce Windows-based "hand-top" or "ultra-portable" computers that pack the power of full-blown PCs into computers about the size of paperback book. OQO's executives previously managed Apple Computer Inc.'s PowerBook line of laptops, while FlipStart is owned and operated by Vulcan Inc., the investment arm of Microsoft Corp. co-founder Paul Allen.

The handtop computers are expected to cost \$1,300 to \$2,000, predicts Cnet, an online service that tracks the technology marketplace, and they will come with wireless networking, spacious 20- to 30-gigabyte hard drives and 5-inch screens. Sony sells similar ultra-portables in Japan and may introduce the systems to the U.S. market later this year.

In theory, the ultra-portables will eliminate the need for REALTORS® to carry around hefty notebook computers.

Handy Advice

Those in the market for handhelds and smart phones have plenty of options. Just ask **Linda Soesbe, CRS**, associate broker at McGinnis GMAC Real Estate, Colorado Springs, Colo.

"I don't know where to begin," quips Soesbe, when asked about her mobile-technology preferences. During the past decade, she has used PDAs based on the two most popular mobile computer platforms: Palm and Microsoft Corp.'s Windows CE. In recent years, Soesbe has depended on the Sony Clié, Treo and Supra Zire 71 (all Palm-based devices), as well as Hewlett-Packard Co.'s iPAQ (based on Windows CE).

Soesbe's tendency to move from one device to another created an organizational migraine. The reason: She

had to manage multiple customer databases across multiple devices — including her laptop computer. Seeking information sanity, Soesbe moved all of her customer-contact-management and scheduling information into a single program: Microsoft's Outlook. The program works with her laptop computer and her iPAQ smart phone. Through a simple wired or wireless connection, Soesbe can synchronize the Outlook information across both devices — ensuring that the laptop and smart phone both contain up-to-date information.

Of course, these devices don't come cheaply. Smart phones typically cost \$450 to \$650, with ongoing monthly service charges of \$25 to \$79 per month. Cellular service providers typically charge an additional monthly fee

(\$15 to \$30) for wireless Internet access on smart phones.

Agents say such costs are easy to justify — especially while on the road. "If I go out of town for a weekend, my travel doesn't affect my clients," says Davis. "I'm always within reach, and I always have customer information at my fingertips because of my smart phone."

During a recent trip to Washington, D.C., Davis relied on her smart phone to push pending business forward. When an agent called Davis's smart phone inquiring about a new listing, she was able to provide timely information, negotiate offers and counter offers, and reach an accepted price. Along the way, Davis used her wireless laptop to e-mail a Counteroffer Addendum to her clients. Thanks to these digital tools, Davis negotiated the deal and still found time to relax and explore a local D.C. museum.

Porter has had similar success while on the road. "Having instant access to my contact manager for scheduling appointments or direct dialing the phone from my database are both cool," he says. "Furthermore, it's inevitable when I'm out showing property that a buyer will point and ask, 'Why aren't we looking at that house?'"

When that question arises, Porter reaches for his smart phone and runs a quick search through the MLS listings in Pocket Real Estate (www.PocketRealEstate.Com).

Porter tends to catch technology waves early. In addition to building his sales career — which began as Rookie of the Year for a Wisconsin agency in 1990 — he has been an instructor for a national real-estate computer-system company in Minneapolis. As an expert in mainstream real estate technology, such as contact-management software, personal digital assistants, digital imaging, Internet, e-mail marketing and agent Web sites, Porter has conducted real estate training and technology seminars for thousands of REALTORS® for more than a decade.

Small Drawbacks

Despite their power and flexibility, smart phones aren't perfect. In many cases, their built-in digital cameras don't have enough horsepower to take high-quality photos of home interiors and landscapes. Rather, the built-in

cameras are designed for simple, low-resolution photos that can be shared between friends and family members. "I never use the camera on my phone, as I don't think the quality is worth much," Davis concedes.

Many public and private facilities — health clubs, government offices, theaters and financial offices — have banned digital cameras from their premises to minimize security and privacy concerns. As sales surge to more than 170 million units this year, privacy concerns related to cell phones with built-in cameras will surely escalate, estimates Strategy Analytics, a market-research firm.

Agents may increasingly find themselves temporarily having to surrender their smart phones (with built-in cameras) when visiting select private and public locations. That's cause for concern, since giving up a smart phone — even for a few minutes — could mean missing a critical call or having customer information stolen from the device while it's out of your hands.

Unfortunately, most users don't understand the security risks associated with smart phones, PDAs and other mobile devices. Roughly 86 percent of companies permit their employees to do business using mobile devices, but 83.6 percent haven't set usage and security guidelines for the devices, according to Bluefire Security Technologies. Eager to fill that void, Bluefire designs security and privacy software that ensure PDAs and smart phones remain secure, even if they fall into the wrong hands. The company also works closely with anti-virus specialists like Symantec Corp. to protect mobile devices from hackers, software worms and other types of digital attacks.

Look Ma, No Wires!

The Cost of Wi-Fi Wherever You Go

Home or Office: Wi-Fi in your home or office is free.

It connects to your paid cable modem or DSL service.

Road: Many schools, hotels and other businesses offer free Wi-Fi service to attract and retain customers.

Five Technologies to Watch

- 1 Wi-Fi:** Currently the most popular standard for short-range (100 feet or less) Internet and network communications between notebook computers and handheld computers. Wi-Fi service is widely available in Starbucks, hotels, schools and businesses.
- 2 Wi-MAX:** An emerging technology that will eventually allow notebook computers and handheld devices to connect wirelessly to the Internet at distances up to 30 miles. Far faster than cellular communications, Wi-Max products are expected to debut late this year. Strongly backed by Intel Corp.
- 3 Bluetooth:** A wireless technology for very short-range communications. Say, between a notebook computer and a printer a few feet away. Heavily hyped in the 1990s, product glitches and high costs initially limited Bluetooth's popularity.
- 4 Bluefire Security Technologies:** A start-up company that makes security and privacy software for handheld devices and smart phones. Serves the Windows CE and Palm marketplaces.
- 5 Treo:** The most popular smart phone on the market. Typically costs \$450 to \$650. Savvy agents applaud the Treo's strength as both a cell phone, personal organizer and mobile Internet access device.

What's Next?

Looking ahead, savvy CRS professionals expect more and more of their digital devices to function without wires. "It's all about wireless," Porter says. "Wireless printers, wireless PDA synchronization with your laptop or desktop PCs, wireless head sets and wireless Internet access — everywhere."

Many agents are keeping a close eye on wireless wide-area networking, often called WiMAX. Unlike traditional Wi-Fi PC networks — which can't communicate beyond 100 feet or so — emerging WiMAX services will allow PDAs, smart phones and laptops to establish wireless Internet connections over thousands of feet and perhaps even miles. "It's like having the range of a cell phone connection on your notebook," Porter says.

In Washington, D.C., for instance, Verizon is testing high-speed, long-range wireless Internet access for notebook computers, handhelds and smart phones. Early reviews of the system by Walt Moss-

berg, a widely quoted technology pundit at *The Wall Street Journal*, were quite favorable. Verizon expects to roll out the long-range wireless system to additional cities over the next 18 months.

Smart phones, handhelds, laptops and printers also will increasingly support a wireless technology known as Bluetooth. Designed for very short ranges (figure 10 feet or less), Bluetooth allows wireless devices to discover and communicate with each other instantly. As a result, a laptop can quickly send documents to a printer without any need to string a cord between the devices. "I think every device will soon support Bluetooth," Soesbe says.

Agents are also keeping a close eye on so-called Tablet PCs, which resemble a picture frame and are promoted by Microsoft, HP and other major PC vendors. A stylus (similar to those that come with PDAs) allows users to write notes and input commands directly on the device's screen. Though far from a mainstream hit, Tablet PCs have gained traction within warehouses and hospitals, where mobile users often need information at their fingertips and a big screen (10-plus inches) to work effectively. "You might see agents use Tablet PCs to manage contracts, because they can be signed and e-mailed directly from the device," says Soesbe.

In the meantime, smart phones remain all the rage. ■

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