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Paka-paka Girls

DoCoMo is out to prove that 3G services can be a commercial success. They'll have to win over style-crazed teens first

By TIM CLARK

In Oct. 1, NTT DoCoMo of Japan inaugurated the world's first third-generation mobile-phone network not with a bang but with a whisper. So-called 3G phone services were supposed to mark the beginning of a new era in wireless communications featuring broadband Internet access and video phones. But the low-key launch by DoCoMo, a company that has had the greatest success introducing customers to the wireless Web through its i-mode service, speaks volumes about the outlook for 3G today. After communications companies spent more than \$100 billion on licenses to operate 3G networks, markets have lost confidence that they can be run profitably. Only a handful of the brave, with DoCoMo in the lead, are quietly pushing ahead with their 3G plans.

The industry will be watching DoCoMo to see how it endeavors to create demand where none currently exists. Who will DoCoMo be watching? Japanese consumers, and one group in particular: high-school girls. Japanese society is deeply — some might say disturbingly — interested in the daily lives of the precocious. Young girls are intensely style conscious and price sensitive. Manufacturers have learned from long experience that if their new product is a hit with them, it will likely be adopted in mainstream Japan as well. What, then, do high-school girls want? Online publication ASCII24.com recently polled a group of them to assess their cellphone preferences. Their responses helped illuminate the challenges DoCoMo faces in taking 3G to the mass market.

The discussion began with handset design. To teens, style is the most important factor; a carrier offering trendy phones has an edge on the competition. M-girls generally agreed that the larger screens of the "paka-paka" handsets (named for the satisfying sound that clamshell casings emit when folding and unfolding) make them cooler than "monoblock" phones. But several panel members objected to paka-pakas because they tend to be wider and heavier than their nonfolding counterparts.

In Japan, consumer electronics become smaller and lighter over time (the keihakutansho phenomenon, literally "light, thin, short, small"). But 3G phones introduce a new wrinkle, because better video and Internet capabilities should increase demand for larger screens. Carriers and manufacturers will need to reconcile conflicting requirements over the next few years. What we are likely to see is a wider variety of handsets built to address an increasingly segmented market. Older users, for example, shy away from phones that are also digital cameras, organizers, game machines and music players — they just want a dirt-simple device for voice communication. "We're now offering phones with big buttons and larger onscreen text, stripped-down versions of their more popular cousins," says a manager at one of Japan's largest cellphone companies.

Girls, and 20-something salarymen as well, seem to desire a certain amount of complexity. Right now they're bonkers for phones with cameras so they can swap pictures of themselves wirelessly. Manufacturers will need to continue to find innovative ways to differentiate their products, and software can help — as was vividly demonstrated when one girl pulled out her J-Sky "paka-paka" phone and showed the others how she can specify the sound effect that is played when she unfolds the device. This elicited an appreciative chorus of "cool!" from her peers and prompted a teenybopping colleague to comment: "That's the kind of playful little idea that clinches my decision on which handset to buy."

Japan's handset market is predicated on rapid innovation. Expect surprising developments as DoCoMo sets out to make 3G a reality. One final note: high-school girls, those pitiless arbiters of style, have decreed that long straps used to hang a phone around one's neck (along with other straps and charms) are now officially Uncool. "Simple is in," the girls say. If only they would make up their minds.

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