

This article takes an in depth look at the new Blackberry hand-held wireless e-mail computer produced by Research in Motion. It assesses both it's usability and popularity in the United States and also looks at the competition, to see whether it will find a market in either Europe or Asia. Runs to 1238 words.

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## **BLACKBERRIES ARE NOT THE ONLY FRUIT**

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Autumn in England is a “season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, close bosom-friend of the maturing sun; conspiring with him how to load and bless with fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run.” Perhaps one of the fruits the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet John Keats had in mind when he wrote those lines was the Blackberry. A hardy, woody perennial, it's dark, globular fruits sprout in profusion at that time of year but so do it's myriad thorns that can scar the clumsy picker. But harvest them with practised precision and the gastronomic rewards are many.

Perhaps that is why the boffins at Research in Motion in the U.S. have named their wireless, hand held Internet and e-mail access computer after this temperate plant. Much like it's organic namesake, it may appear to be a bit prickly and hostile to the uninitiated but once you know how to handle it, a whole new world of possibilities opens up before you.

The Blackberry has been one of the most talked about new gizmos for the on-the-go executive in recent months. Why? Because, unlike the plethora of other email hand-helds on the market, there's no need to hunt down the nearest phone socket to upload and download your messages. You just type your text, press 'send' and away it goes into the ether, arriving at the receiver's PC mailbox or Blackberry without so much as a bleep of connection protocol.

Before you go thinking that you can merrily download all that Spam from your 'bog standard' Hotmail account, think again, because the Blackberry's software is not, as yet, universally compatible with all PC mail platforms. The good news is that if you or your company uses Microsoft Outlook or Schedule+, Group Wise, Lotus Organiser & Notes, Symantec Act, Goldmine or Netscape for your mails there's no problem. After a little bit of work with your system administrator or ISP, all it takes is a discreet beep or unobtrusive vibration for you to know that a message has been forwarded to your unit as soon as it hits the mailbox back at home or the office.

But that convenience comes at a price. After you've dug deep for the US\$499 purchase price, there's another US\$39.95 monthly subscription for the mail delivery service and, as some U.S. users have found, you don't always get what you pay for, particularly if you live outside the network coverage area. Try sending "wish you were here" from a beach hut in Borneo and you may find the service patchy, restricted or sometimes unreliable. One can only hope that as the demand for wireless email spreads, either the network will expand outside its current metropolitan bubble or carrier deals are struck with local service providers that have a wider range. In somewhere as compact as Singapore, however, there should be no problem but it would pay to check out the reach and reliability of the carrier before parting with any hard earned cash.

What that cash does buy is a full function organiser, not ungenerous 5mb of memory, nippy 32 bit Intel 386 processor, address book and memo pad all packed into a feather-light 5.3 ounce 'mobile office'. If you fancy spicing up your MRT commute with a little web surfing, the Blackberry also sports a 'micro browser' that, although not graphic capable, users found adequate for accessing news, movie times or stocks & shares information etc. However, you do have to pay an extra US\$10 per month for this service.

The small QWERTY keyboard may take some getting used to. Palm Stylus users found it, and the thumb-operated track wheel used to access functions, challenging but not insurmountable. Walt Clayton from Dallas, however, thought the keys were situated too close together, thus making it harder to type and easier to make errors if you have fat fingers or your taxi driver enjoys counting potholes. Stabbing with your pencil rubber might be the best solution for the less dextrous.

Although the screen is not touch sensitive, Weldon Dodd from Colorado found the 16-20 line display big enough to glance at his weekly calendar and read an entire contact record all at once. For Michael J Saylor of Vermont, Blackberry's 5mb of RAM was more than adequate. He could stuff 500 contacts, 1000 calendar items, 100 memos & notes and 1000 emails into its Tardis-like interior. Great for those with a hectic schedule but disaster if you leave it on the No.90 bus to Choa Chu Kang. Fortunately the Blackberry is PC (though not Mac) compatible and can backup to or restore data from your hard disc via a serial port and some special software that comes with the unit. Fear not though, the likelihood of getting your 'life' back intact is reasonably high, even if it gathers dust in the lost & found office, thanks to the rechargeable lithium battery that lasts from 1 to 2 weeks.

The response in America and Canada to the Blackberry has been generally good. The ability to gain a competitive edge by responding immediately to client's mail or have a less intrusive but just as immediate communication medium than the mobile phone seems to have gone down well. Whether it will catch on in Europe is another matter.

Cellnet, the mobile phone arm of troubled telecomm giant BT, hasn't enjoyed much success in persuading corporate clients to buy its high speed Internet and e-mail phone services, even after a year of marketing. Only a fraction of BT's estimated 300 major business customers felt that their employees needed to use

e-mail and the Internet on the move. A source at one company said, "You may be surprised how few people need to check their e-mail in a cab on their way to lunch". Couple this resistance with the disappointing performance of W.A.P. and you can only ponder if BT will have a similar up hill struggle with the Blackberry.

Perhaps they know something we don't, because Research in Motion and BT Cellnet have recently signed a Supply Agreement for Blackberry in the UK. But even before the ink is dry, competition may be looming on the horizon. Not just from Motorola's Timeport 953 wireless that can also send email to a phone number and read the message out to the recipient in a digitised voice, but also from the fledgling GPRS technology.

Could Motorola's GPRS Z100 Multimedia Smartphone with it's speedy, 'pay only for what you download', always-on Net and e-mail access or CityCab's plans to provide Web portals in its taxis, leave the Blackberry rotting on the branches of obsolescence or is the wireless fruit bowl big enough for all?

Had Keats been alive today he, like me, would probably have decided that sometimes you can be just 'too available' and plumped for the ones you eat with custard instead.

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