Tap, trace, doodle: choices abound for phone users

Consumers have more choices than ever before of how to tell their mobile phones what they want to do, and are likely to change their habits faster than they expect as distribution speeds up.

Handwriting, tracing and plain speaking to your device are some of the alternatives to typing that are now on the market -- and app stores and Google Inc's Android are putting them into the hands of hundreds of millions of users.

Apple Inc's original iPhone in 2007 with its responsive touchscreen revolutionized the way consumers interacted with their phones, spawning widespread imitation at the high end of the market.

But typing on a touch screen is still problematic for many users and a host of alternatives have recently sprung up.

Nuance Communications Inc, the maker of Dragon speech-recognition software, this week launched an application in five European languages that allows users to switch between four different input methods at the touch of an icon.

Swype, invented by the creator of the widely used T9 predictive text technology for numeric keypads, lets users input words by tracing their shape on a touch screen keyboard.

Others go a step further: Vlingo combines voice recognition with what it calls an intent engine -- guessing, for example, that a user wants to see a movie when it hears a film title, and responding with local cinema listings.

Last year, Apple bought Siri, an iPhone app that doubles as a voice-operated "personal assistant," doing tasks like booking taxis or making restaurant reservations, helped by the phone's knowledge of where the user is.

CLICKING ON GLASS

Other smartphone makers have been quick to embrace such technology, either offering it in app stores or pre-installing it on their devices.

At the Samsung Electronics Co Ltd stand at this week's Mobile World Congress, visitors experimented with some of the new apps.

"Once you get used to it, it will probably be lovely," said Boudewijn Rempt, a 41-year-old software executive from the Netherlands trying out Swype. But he added that he could easily live without it.

"I've been typing with my two thumbs for ages now. Being stubborn, I'm fast enough this way," he said. "If all the devices supported it equally well I might be tempted to try it."

It may not be long before that becomes the case.

The distribution of apps through app stores means users no longer need to wait to replace their handset to obtain new features, while the adoption of Android by dozens of phone makers is standardizing advanced technology.

In addition, some companies, like Nuance, make their software available to developers to embed in their apps, giving users additional opportunities to stumble upon uses for dictation or voice-activated Web search.

"If Swype would get its technology onto a few apps, they could get really swift adoption," says Christian Lindholm, managing partner at digital design agency Fjord, whose clients include Yahoo! Inc and social network Foursquare.

Lindholm, who invented the Navi-Key menu navigation system that was central to hundreds of millions of Nokia candy-bar phones last decade, said he believed users would overcome their skepticism if the new technology worked well.

"It's not natural to click on a plate of glass. Speed and lack of errors are the key," he said.

STICKINESS

Swype, whose investors include Nokia and Samsung, does not allow developers access to its technology, preferring to license it to handset makers. It shipped on 20 million devices last year and says it is set as the default keyboard on about half.

"We would rather be a system-wide solution than be incorporated in apps. It also promotes stickiness," Chief Executive Mike McSherry told Reuters in an interview. "Our goal is to be the default for every single keyboard."

More context-rich services like Vlingo may take longer to catch on, since they depend on users being willing to share information about where they are, and on Internet connections to fetch information.

At the Samsung stand, Rempt said of Vlingo: "It's nice to have local. Of course, it needs a bit of processing capacity. Like all of these devices, it presumes you have the Internet."

He said international roaming charges would prevent him from making much use of it. "I think it's good for the U.S. But I'm Dutch -- I barely have 400 kilometers by 400 kilometers (250 miles) where I can use it."

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