

To BlackBerry With Love By Ann Monroe

The announcement – back at the beginning of 2000 – seemed so crazy that it had to be explained. Salomon Smith Barney had signed up with Research in Motion, a little-known Canadian company, to equip 2,500 of its employees with something called a BlackBerry Handheld. Why? To allow them, the press release said, “to stay connected to their email throughout the day.”

Last September, when RIM launched its newest device, the BlackBerry Pearl, at a glitzy London event, nobody had to tout the virtues of mobile email. Nobody had to explain what a BlackBerry was, either. The chunky little email-only box that Salomon had given its employees five years earlier had not only morphed into a sleek smartphone; it had also become one of the world’s best-known brands, an iconic device so beloved of its 6.2 million users that it’s often called a “CrackBerry.”

But though the Pearl – RIM’s first consumer-oriented smartphone – has the camera and mp3 player that have become almost inescapable in mobile phones these days, at heart it’s still a BlackBerry: it’s all about the email. (RIM didn’t even begin adding voice capability to BlackBerries till 2002, and didn’t produce its first true smartphone till 2004.)

RIM gets something that most mobile phone makers don’t, says Clay Shirky, a technology writer and adjunct professor at New York University. “The purpose of a communications device,” he says, “is to communicate.” Most mobile phone carriers, he says, “have cable [TV] envy.” They want to make money charging fees for content, and the phone makers have gone along, producing phones that are as much media centers as communications tools. But BlackBerries are focused on communication, and at that, they can’t be beat. On a BlackBerry, you don’t have to *do* anything to get your email; it just arrives, instantly. If you delete a message, it goes into the trash bin on your desktop as well. If you answer it, your reply shows up on your desktop, too.

The email is seamlessly linked to the web browser, as well as to the phone’s address book, calendar, memo and task

programs, all of which (along with the email) sync to your desktop. In essence, the BlackBerry functions like a mini-PC – complete with a surprisingly functional thumb keyboard. Users can click on an address in the browser to send an email, or on a phone number in an email to make a call. Attachments in formats like Word and Excel open instantly. The software is so powerful, says Martin Trautschold, co-author of *Blackberry Made Simple*, that most people only use about 10-20% of its capabilities. The BlackBerry has also attracted what Jerome Mol, CEO of GPXS, which provides software and services for BlackBerries, calls a “tsunami” of software applications from other developers. Users can add not just games, but time and expense trackers [[They are programs that let traveling business people track time spent on a project (for billing purposes) and expenses (for reimbursement purposes)], printer drivers, and even mini versions of Microsoft Office to their devices. You can map any address in the US - and they’re good maps.

The discovery that they are no longer tied to their desk gives first-time BlackBerry users a euphoric sense of liberty. “I don’t have to go down the hall to get my email,” says Michael Mosher, an information security consultant with Computer Sciences Corp., who was so excited by his first Blackberry that he published an essay in a trade publication titled *How the BlackBerry Changed my Life*. “The information is right there. It’s very freeing.” After euphoria comes obsession. Trautschold, who’s now working on a book on Blackberry addiction, encountered one man who keeps a zip-lock plastic bag in his bathroom – so he can use his Blackberry in the shower.

So if the BlackBerry is so great, why hasn’t it taken over the world? Well, give it time; RIM’s first phone aimed at the general consumer, has only been on the market two months and is offered – so far – only by the US’s smallest carrier, T-Mobile. And the Pearl costs \$200 (with a two-year contract), while T-Mobile customers who don’t care about email can get a free phone.

But users say once you try a BlackBerry, you’re hooked. Mosher, who once juggled laptop, mobile phone and PDA, has now completely dropped the PDA (and his old

mobile phone) for his BlackBerry. And that, says Mol, is the magic of the BlackBerry. “With any other device, people use it for a few weeks and then drop it. But with the BlackBerry, they just use it more and more. It really *does* change your life.”

Of course, it can also give you a severe case of thumb cramp.