

Dumbphones find a niche in the age of the smartphone

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New versions of the Nokia 3310 were unveiled at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain. Photo by Martin Landi/PA Images via Getty Images

Not every phone needs to be "smart" to be popular, it seems.

Phones that can only make calls and send texts are often jokingly called "dumbphones." These phones were supposed to disappear as technology and people moved on to smartphones.

But the dumbphone has survived. It remains a popular cheap option for people in developing countries and among people in the West who have fond memories of simpler devices.

Dumbphones Still Useful

The appeal of the dumbphone was apparent Sunday in Barcelona at the Mobile World Congress, the world's biggest mobile phone convention.

Nokia was one of the most popular phone companies of the early 2000s. At the convention, it unveiled a revamped version of its famed 3310 phone model, more than 10 years after it was discontinued.

Basic phones remain useful to people in poorer countries. These phones are relatively inexpensive, said Julien Miniconi, a cellular expert at the company Wavestone. The cheapness of the phones makes them more available to people who normally couldn't afford them.

"It makes sense especially in countries where the network is not great," he added.

Dumbphone Sales Very Strong

Last year 1.5 billion smartphones were sold around the world, according to research firm Gartner.

But the dumbphone market is still significant, with nearly 400 million sold in 2016.

In certain emerging markets such as India, their sales still outstrip smartphones.

The International Data Corporation, a market research firm, studied simple phones in India. They say these phones accounted for more than half of all mobiles sold in the third quarter of 2016 in India.

And sales are continuing to rise in India by about 4 percent per year.

Even in developed nations where the smartphone sales are steady, the dumbphones continue to sell.

Not Everyone Joining The Smartphone Revolution

It is still a small group of people buying them, said Thomas Husson, a mobile analyst. The simple phone often appeals to older people who want simpler phone models without mobile Internet. It also is popular with people who like the phones' old-school appearance.

Young kids also use them as a first phone. Some people use them as secondary phone to lend to visiting friends and family from another country and avoid extra international charges.

British actor Eddie Redmayne was famous for playing scientist Stephen Hawking in "The Theory of Everything." Now, he's making headlines as a smartphone refuser.

"It was a reaction against being glued permanently to my iPhone during waking hours," the 35-year-old said.

Within any age group, it's not hard to find people who refuse to join the smartphone revolution.

"I have no interest in a smartphone — it's expensive, fragile and I don't see the use for it," said Sandrine, a 39-year-old Paris-based artist.

"There is also the whole commercial aspect as well, with the need to update phones all the time," she added. Sandrine expressed additional concern about "the work conditions in China" where many smartphones are made.

Some People "Just Want To Be Reachable"

Germany's Deutsche Telekom company sells several basic phones. The company wants to meet the needs of people "who just want to be reachable," said a spokeswoman for the operator.

Nokia's original 3310 sold nearly 120 million units worldwide, making it one of the world's best-selling mobile phones. But it is unlikely the newly revamped version, which includes internet access, will post similar sales.

HMD Global is a Finnish company that bought the rights to make new Nokia phones. By making the dumbphones, HMD hopes to increase publicity for the three other smartphones it is making. The company showed off these new smartphones alongside the new Nokia 3310, said analyst Husson.

Ian Fogg, a mobile expert at research firm IHS, said that HMD, as a new start-up company, needs to have both smartphones and dumbphones. They should avoid being seen as a company that only makes old phones, he says.

Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article highlights the reason WHY the popularity of dumbphones is surprising?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
 - (B) "Dumbphones Still Useful"
 - (C) "Dumbphone Sales Very Strong"
 - (D) "Not Everyone Joining The Smartphone Revolution"
- 2 Which paragraph in the section "Dumbphones Still Useful" explains WHY a dumbphone is the best choice for some people?
- 3 Which two of the following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?
1. *Phones that can only make calls and send texts are often jokingly called "dumbphones."*
 2. *Nokia was one of the most popular phone companies of the early 2000s.*
 3. *But the dumbphone market is still significant, with nearly 400 million sold in 2016.*
 4. *It is still a small group of people buying them, said Thomas Husson, a mobile analyst.*
- (A) 1 and 2
 - (B) 2 and 4
 - (C) 1 and 3
 - (D) 3 and 4
- 4 Read the section "Not Everyone Joining The Smartphone Revolution."
How is the MAIN idea developed in this section?
- (A) through a description of the surprisingly useful features of dumbphones
 - (B) through examples that explain why some people choose to use dumbphones
 - (C) through a comparison of the pros and cons of dumbphones and smartphones
 - (D) through details that explain how dumbphones work differently than smartphones