

Michelle Quinn: iPhone's 10th anniversary: How the Apple product some critics panned changed our lives

By Michelle Quinn The Mercury News



Apple CEO Steve Jobs demonstrates the new iPhone during his keynote address at MacWorld Conference & Expo in San Francisco in this Jan. 9, 2007 file photo. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, file)

When Apple introduced the iPhone 10 years ago, skeptics pounced.

Sure, the iPhone was a bright, shiny object, another product that crazed Apple lovers would line up to buy, as they always did. But the phone was a hodgepodge, a Swiss Army knife of functions trying to do too much, critics said. It had no stylus, no keyboard buttons, no secure email for business users. People would never type long emails on it. One analyst predicted “a

backlash of sorts as people figure out how much this thing doesn't do."

The iPhone's biggest booster, then-Apple CEO Steve Jobs, knew the device's potential as he took the stage in San Francisco on Jan. 9, 2007. "Every once in awhile, a revolutionary product comes along that changes the world," he said. "Today Apple is going to reinvent the phone."

Jobs turned out to be right. The iPhone was the device that "conditioned us to expect to be connected to the global network every moment of the day," said Paul Saffo, a longtime tech industry observer. And that conditioning changed everything. The following year, Apple created the iPhone App Store, a centralized market that opened up the device to software developers. Meanwhile, other smartphone manufacturers like HTC and Samsung sold their own handsets with multitouch interfaces relying on Google's Android operating system. They, too, opened app stores.

Today, more than two-thirds of Americans carry a smartphone, up 6 percent from the prior year, according to eMarketer. With smartphone apps, people call an Uber, find a date through Tinder, look for jobs on LinkedIn, watch videos on YouTube, play Angry Birds, control their home thermostats and so on. Our smartphones have become so critical to our lives that there's an app for finding a lost or stolen one.

The iPhone (along with its smartphone competitors) has gone from being "a fetish to the tool for mediating modern life," said Mike McGuire, a vice president of research at Gartner. (In 2007 at the iPhone unveiling, he came close to conveying what would happen, telling me, "once you have the thing, you will want to carry it all the time.")

To test how deeply embedded smartphones are, try to live without one.

Turning it off while camping or out at sea doesn't count. When I recently destroyed my iPhone in the rain, I managed to stay calm with some deep breathing. It was a Saturday. I'd be fine turning to my laptop for email and doing internet searches. I have a house phone. "Look at me, I can function without a smartphone," I thought. "It's still possible." That was the first hour.

Without Maps or Waze, Google's navigation app, I got lost picking up my daughter at a school across town. I couldn't look up the address or text anyone to help. I drove around in concentric circles hoping to stumble on where I needed to go. In the end, I had to wave down a mail deliverer. If anyone still knew their way without a smartphone, she would.

Yes, it's ridiculous how much many of us rely on this thing now but oh well. Still, there are downsides to this always-connected life. More than 70 percent of smartphone owners sleep with them. France recently passed a law affirming the right of workers to disconnect, not answer emails, when they are on personal time. "That came as a result, I would argue, from smartphones," said McGuire. Texting while driving has become a serious public health issue. And, we are still trying to figure out etiquette rules for using smartphones.

But 10 years later, after Apple has sold more than 1 billion iPhones, are there any skeptics left?

The iPhone outstripped all expectations and became Apple's largest source of revenue. Yet its 10th anniversary comes at a time when the iPhone itself is no longer a status symbol. To the untrained eye, an iPhone, a Samsung Galaxy or another Android-

based phone like the OnePlus look much the same, especially in protection cases.

“Each device matters less and less,” said Bob O’Donnell, president and chief analyst of TECHanalysis Research. “We’ve passed peak smartphone.”

That has hit Apple. In 2016, iPhone sales slumped, leading the company to cut 15 percent from the pay of Tim Cook, its CEO, for missing performance goals. The smartphone market may be saturated, with people holding on to their old ones longer. What matters more are the services. The devices themselves have become more like vessels than status symbols.

Technological advancements, even from Apple, are incremental now, tweaks that fans cheer but that aren’t creating new markets. Is that a problem for Apple and the entire tech industry? Maybe. “We need new inflection points,” said Tim Bajarin, president of Creative Strategies, who told me in 2007 that with the iPhone Apple “may have created a new category.”

“An anniversary is a good time to introduce inflection points for the industry’s growth,” he said.

Whatever comes next, we probably won’t fully understand its impact at first. It seems to take us a decade to figure out how the next new thing will fit in our life. But when we do, we don’t let go.

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