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A guide to alternative smartphones

Ready to runcible

Want to be different? There are now many handset brands to choose from, besides the ubiquitous iPhone or Galaxy

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IS IT a clock? Is it a rock? It's a Runcible. That is the name of what might be the strangest-looking smartphone ever designed. Styled after an old-fashioned fob-watch, it takes its name from the works of Edward Lear, a 19th-century British poet who invented nonsense words. Its Californian (where else) creator, Monohm, bills it as an "anti-smartphone" that does not dare to distract its user with alerts and beeps and other forms of information overload. Instead of lots of hyperactive apps, for instance, the Runcible provides only a simple summary of its user's social networking.



Runcible is not the only unusual smartphone destined to appear on the market. Google will begin a trial in Puerto Rico later this year of a "modular" device called Ara. Users will be able to update the phone, say with a new battery or a better camera, by replacing one of its plug-in modules. LG sells smartphones with a curved body and a pair of digital eyes on the back that change expression (supposedly to establish "emotional" contact with the user). And the latest model from Yota, a small Russian maker, has a second black-and-white display on the back, which is meant to allow a user to read for hours without draining the battery.

So should consumers expect smartphones to evolve into all sorts of different shapes and sizes? Before the arrival of the touchscreen phones, after all, there was a greater variety of shapes, from clamshell designs to slide-out keyboards. Yet unusual designs, such as the Runcible, are likely to remain rarities for now—activities like typing are suited to palm-sized rectangular devices. If consumers really want an unusual-looking smartphone then they had best wait a few years, says Geoff Blaber of CSS Insight, a market-research firm. To provide

really novel shapes, components such as batteries and screens will first have to evolve, perhaps with both becoming flexible. Even then, because of their clout in the market and their economies of scale, it is likely to be Apple or Samsung which pioneer them.

The choice of brands available to consumers is multiplying fast, however. Most of the newcomers are regional brands, which come by the hundreds and not just in China, where the phenomenon is most prevalent; Coolpad, OnePlus and Oppo are among the better-known names. France has seen the rise of Wiko, which is now one of the country's most popular smartphone brands. Africa, too, has its brands, such as VMK, which hails from Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo.

Although these firms make much of their regional roots ("African technology for Africa" is VMK's tagline), most are combinations of Chinese manufacturing and local marketing. The producers may add nice features (one of Wiko's latest models, called Highway Pure, for instance, is only 5.1 millimetres thick), but their aim is mainly to serve buyers who want to upgrade to a real smartphone, but cannot afford the latest Apple iPhone or Samsung Galaxy. The Highway Pure, with a respectable list of specifications, costs less than \$300; VMK's Elikia L costs about \$110. At those prices most of these phones represent good value, and they work perfectly well. (The odd-looking phones are a lot dearer: when the Runcible is launched later this year it is expected to be priced towards the top end; the two-screen YotaPhone 2 retails for \$680.)

The question is whether, and for how long, the regional brands will be available to consumers elsewhere. The competition for cheap smartphones is cut-throat and some of the smaller regional brands will not survive, predicts Francisco Jeronimo of IDC, a market-research firm. Xiaomi, a fast-growing Chinese firm, is one of the big brands, but problems with intellectual-property rights might prevent it from moving as quickly as it would like into markets outside China. That means India's Micromax may become the first big regional Asian smartphone brand to be widely offered to Western consumers. The company is already India's biggest smartphone vendor, according to some analysts, with a market share of 22% compared with 20% for Samsung, its main rival. Micromax boasts an impressive line-up of dozens of smartphone models, ranging in price from less than \$30 to more than \$200.

Call the plumber

Novelty-seekers are not just interested in design and price; they also care about the services that handset-makers offer. Given that, Mr Jeronimo says, buyers should look at brands which view their devices as more of a loss leader and try to make money by offering attractive services. This is Xiaomi's territory. The Chinese company is often compared to Apple and its boss, Lei Jun, feted as a second Steve Jobs, but the better comparison may be to Google and its co-founders. Xiaomi's ambition is to be an online powerhouse, not just a handset-maker. In April Mr Lei predicted the company's services revenue will triple to nearly \$1 billion this

year, about 6% of expected total sales of \$16 billion.

Micromax has ambitions in this area as well. One of its most interesting handsets is Yureka, a \$140 budget smartphone powered by Cyanogen, a variant of Android. It allows users to customise and extend Google's operating system and even exchange the online giant's mobile services for other offerings.

"With Android, every phone became the same. And all the data goes to Google," says Rahul Sharma, a co-founder of Micromax. Cyanogen, he says, will allow the firm to become more like Xiaomi by adding differentiating features and services. "If I'm looking for a plumber, my phone should be able to tell me whether a friend already knows one," explains Mr Sharma. And smartphones should come with a selection of services pre-installed which users can pick and choose from, he adds, rather than being offered only a default set from Google. And if that all sounds a bit too sensible, there is always the Runcible.

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