

# Phone manufacturers only have one chance to get it right

Manufacturers that release rubbish, irritating phones lose those customers – and it can be for life

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A poor phone experience is enough to drive users potty, and poison them to the phone brand forever. Photograph: Phil Cawley/Alamy

They say you only get one chance to make a first impression. For Jamil Kassam, it didn't go in HTC's favour. "I purchased the HTC Desire S back when it first came out," recalls Kassam, 31, thinking back to 2011. "I remember a few friends had the original Desire and spoke highly of it."

But his experience was different. "Within a couple of months of owning the S, the handset was giving me problems. The phone constantly froze, switched itself off at random times, and began to take longer and longer to restart. Since then I took the first available opportunity to move back to the iPhone and realistically I can't see myself

owning an HTC again.”

Similarly, Korea’s LG had one chance to impress Scott Jones, 35, a marketing consultant from London. Unfortunately, it missed it. “I picked up an LG-E400,” Jones explained. “Nothing too exciting but it ticked the boxes. Unfortunately it’s basically unusable.”

The problem, he says, is that its hardware falls short of the software demands. “It’s Android, but it cannot run Android; the internal memory cannot cope with basic updates to Android or Google’s apps. Why they built it with such small internal memory, which was basically full as soon as a couple of Google updates came through, I have no idea.” His conclusion? “Never again will I touch an LG smartphone.”

The experiences of Kassam and Jones (who replied to a [request for experiences](#) via Twitter) shed light on the reality confronting mobile phone companies: they may have only one chance to get it right with customers. A single slip-up, or one bad experience, can be enough to put people off a brand forever.

Why? Because our emotional reactions to smartphones are so strong - much more than with PCs or [feature phones](#). The smartphone travels with us wherever we go, and knows more about us than any other device; it carries what’s important and personal to us, be it music, video, photos or messages. It’s a vital connection to the outside world, to friends and family, as well as to colleagues and acquaintances.

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## Commodity pressure

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But with smartphones [making up the majority of all phones sold in 2013](#), according to IDC, and comprising [85% of phones sold in the UK during the last three months of 2013](#) according to Kantar, getting and retaining customers has become increasingly important.

The other pressure on handset companies is to compete on price. Aside from Apple, which has stuck to the high end (its 5S model starts at £549 SIM-free, its “cheaper” 5C model at £470, and the two-year-old iPhone 4S at £349), those which can’t offer handsets across a broad price range struggle to attract buyers.

“The smartphone has really commoditised the market and it’s becoming very, very difficult for manufacturers to differentiate themselves, and price is increasingly becoming one of the sole factors,” said Anshul Gupta, a principal analyst with research firm Gartner.

But hitting a price point to gain customers can be undone in the longer term if they get a poor experience. That means striking a careful balance, explained Francisco Jeronimo,

research director of European mobile devices for IDC.

“Vendors need to be very careful with the user experience, the quality of materials and the durability of the device because if they have devices that aren’t very good, consumers will move and look at other manufacturers,” he says.

Small niggles and frustrations are often magnified by the frequency that they occur on this most used of devices, which various studies say we consult dozens of times per day. Compounding that potential for irritation are the mobile phone contracts through which most people get their phones. Typically, those last between 18 and 24 months. If your phone irritates you, it’s like being obliged to wear ill-fitting shoes day after day for months on end.

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## Cardboard cutout

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Such was the experience of Kit Peverley, a 33-year-old senior visual designer based in London, who switched from a Motorola Milestone in 2009 to an HTC Sensation in 2011. “From around four months in, my HTC Sensation started to power down at random intervals, often – extremely annoyingly – before I was able to answer incoming calls. This left me with no knowledge of who had called since after restart there would be no record of said call in the call log.”

That niggle grew into general dissatisfaction: “The general build quality of the phone was also very poor with three separate parts used for the back of the case, which began to separate, leading me to replace the case after around six months. The power button also broke and fell out, which at one stage led me having to insert a piece of cardboard in the hole to replace it,” said Peverley.

“I wish I could say that my experience was a one-off, but a colleague was given the same phone on contract and after three months experienced the same restarting and overheating issues I did,” continued Peverley, concluding that “the whole saga has completely turned me off HTC, and for the time being, Android.” (He moved to an iPhone 5 when his contract was up.)

So what’s a struggling handset maker to do? HTC is currently concentrating on the “One” line, the favourably reviewed HTC One and One Mini. Its solution to its falling sales is to produce more phones to hit a greater range of price points, among which the Desire 8 is expected to be unveiled at Mobile World Congress at the end of February, with more joining later this year.

“High-end phones are really important – having the best phone available is crucial for us – but we want to fill out the lower ranges as well,” said Philip Blair, HTC’s president of Europe, Middle East and Africa, speaking to the Guardian.

HTC is not the only mobile manufacturer to sell a range of smartphones at different price points. Almost all the others in the market, including Motorola, Samsung and Sony sell both high-end or flagship smartphones along side more affordable or budget models.

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## Love at first sight

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While some manufacturers have made some very good affordable models – Motorola’s excellent Moto G, for £135, is a standout – others have left somewhat to be desired with restricted features and a frustrating experience.

“First impressions are extremely important, and that’s why every company needs to have the best experience possible, especially as we start to see the second wave of smartphone adoption where people are not just buying their first smartphone, but their second or third,” said Jeronimo.

When manufacturers expand their ranges downward to the budget market, cost-cutting risks producing a bad experience that can poison customers’ view of the brand.

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## Pricy does not always equal good

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Problems like that are not isolated to budget or mid-range smartphones, however. Manufacturers that do not get the smartphone experience right at the high end also run the same risk – and the higher cost of a “flagship” device could increase the potential for alienation.

While some of these issues could be described as one-offs or to have only affected a small amount of users, the same problem remains: these people will never buy the malfunctioning smartphone brand again, especially if the manufacturer fails to respond to the issues.

“Every manufacturer has had problems with their smartphones, including giants like Apple and Samsung, but the customer reaction to those often minor issues is frequently dependent on how quickly companies address the problem,” explained Jeronimo.

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## Not exactly a new problem

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These alienation issues are anything but new. John Wilson, a 64-year-old retired computer language designer from Aylesbury, had issues with a Nokia back in 1999 that put him off the brand for life.

“I liked the 8210 very much. It was small, light and reliable. Unfortunately it had a design fault which meant that after about a year the screen would fail and you would have to mess about pressing the case in a particular place to get it to come back on,” said Wilson.

“It was a well known fault with the phone but Nokia denied it existed and refused to replace the faulty phones. I'm sure Nokia continued to make well designed phones for some time after 1999 but I didn't use any of them,” Wilson concluded.

BlackBerry and Sony have also seen their share of problems, causing buyers to swear off the brand even - or perhaps because - they were die-hard fans. Hussein Kanji was a huge BlackBerry fan - but found the Q10 too buggy to bear, and produced a [furious Tumblr](#) between May and December 2013 detailing his frustrations with the keyboard-enabled Q10. His [final entry](#) says “I've given up. I'm waiting for Typo” - a reference to the slide-on keyboard being built for the iPhone.

Separately, some Sony fans have been [frustrated by touchscreen issues with some Xperia models](#).

Manufacturers that produce a phone with issues, whether software or hardware, which produce a poor experience lose those customers – and it can be for life. That makes the production of quality smartphones at all price ranges exceptionally important.

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## The emotions are strong

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“We've strived to make sure that the incoming lower ranges of HTC phones will have the same experience that our top of the range smartphones have,” said Peter Frølund, vice president of HTC in the UK, told the Guardian.

The inverse experience can also be true: a good budget smartphone experience can win brand loyalty and lead to users buying into higher-priced models.

“Brand loyalty is not quite as powerful as it used to be, making it even more important to maintain quality, especially at lower price points,” explained Gupta.

As manufacturers increasingly struggle to differentiate their smartphones from the competition, brand loyalty and positive word of mouth becomes ever more important to

maintain sales. One poor key handset can destroy a manufacturer's reputation leading to a loss of momentum and a dip in sales.

But it can work the other way too: make customers happy, and they'll stay with you.

"I've tried virtually every phone manufacturer, as I do like the latest kit and am open to change in general, but Samsung seem to have me now," says Jones. "I'll probably get an Galaxy S5 after owning and liking the Galaxy S3."

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