

Technology

HTC phones tell users to wrap up warm

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HTC

HTC's latest smartphones use software that studies its owners' behaviour and plans, and then makes recommendations based of what it has gleaned.

The feature - called the Sense Companion - can be used to maximise battery life and suggest what to wear.

The larger of the two devices - the U Ultra - is also marked out by the fact it has two separate displays.

The "mid range" devices are the latest to have been unveiled this year.

Samsung, Nokia, LG, Asus and Huawei are among those to have had rival launches over the past fortnight.

HTC, however, is under particular pressure for the new U Play and U Ultra to be hits.

The firm has posted a financial loss in each of its last six quarterly earnings reports, and announced its lowest year's revenue in more than a decade for 2016.

It has yet to announce how much the new devices will cost.



Always listening

HTC gave several examples of how the Sense Companion will work in the U Play and U Ultra:

- if it detects the user has a busy day ahead, it will recommend they recharge their handset at a relatively early stage rather than wait until a point that certain functions have to be switched off to avoid shutdown
- if it notices the day is a bank holiday and the owner has not changed their early morning alarm, it will suggest they do so
- if bad weather is forecast it will suggest they take warm clothes and leave longer to get to a destination

The software also makes use of the U Ultra's second display. It uses this to show notifications, suggested apps and commonly-used contacts. The idea is to bring matters to the user's attention without disturbing what they are doing on the main screen.



HTC is not, however, the first to place a second smaller display above the first. LG's V-series of smartphones have a similar feature.

The U Ultra also includes four "always on" omni-directional microphones on its sides to make it better at recognising voice commands issued from a distance.

However, the challenge HTC faces in promoting the devices' AI capabilities is that they lack Google Assistant - the conversational virtual assistant that debuted in the search giant's Pixel handset - and instead run the more limited Google Now facility.



One analyst suggested the devices' most attractive feature might instead prove to be their use of coloured moulded Gorilla Glass on their backs.

"I think it's actually the quality of the devices' curved glass rear panels that will make them stand out," commented Ben Wood from CCS Insight.

"The finish looks fantastic. But HTC's probably only able to achieve this because the phones will be made in much smaller volumes than those of other manufacturers, such as Samsung."

Neither of the two models has a traditional headphone jack socket, and instead provide a USB-C connection.

'Challenging'

Five years ago, HTC was one of the top four best-selling smartphone brands.

Since then, its sales have fallen to the point it now ranks 21st and its own-brand handsets account for less than 1% of the global market, according to research firm IDC.

The Taiwanese firm also manufactures mobile phones sold by other companies - including the Google Pixel - as well as making the high-end Vive virtual reality headset.

Some experts question how long it will stay committed to making its own phones.

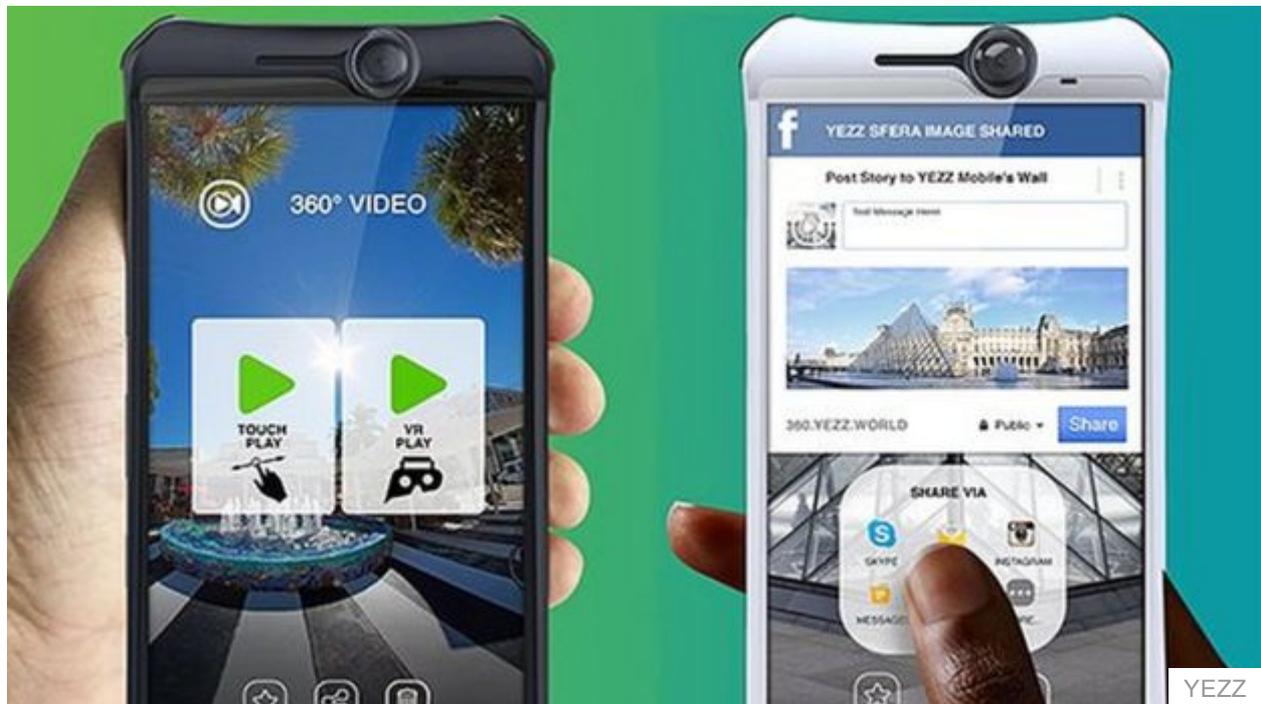


"The growth of the Chinese vendors has been very challenging for HTC," said IDC's Francisco Jeronimo.

"But without having their own branded phones it would be more difficult for them to go to Google and other firms and say, 'This is what we can do.'"

"So, for the moment they will keep the business running.

"But it's another question as to whether it will still be in operation by this time next year. That depends on it increasing sales and making a profit, because at the moment it isn't."



Other smartphones to have been announced this month with unusual features include:

- Yezz Sfera, which features a 360-degree camera above its screen
- Asus Zenfone AR, which includes Google's Project Tango depth-detecting sensors
- HiSense A2-Dual, which has a colour OLED screen on its front and a second e-ink black-and-white one on its rear
- Changhong H2, which includes a spectrometer that analyses the chemical composition of food and other objects

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