



PRODUCT SHOOTOUT

Wireless email roundup

By [Ron Herardian](#)

As new wireless services, email, and devices hit the market, I wondered what the best wireless email devices were for business users. I rounded up five of the most popular devices and gave each of them a test drive. The devices I looked at were the Palm i705 (at <http://www.palm.com/us/products/palmi705/>), the RIM 957 (at http://www.blackberry.com/products/rim857_957/index.shtml), the Handspring Treo 270 (at <http://www.handspring.com/products/treo270/>), the Siemens SX56 (at <http://www.my-siemens.com>), and a Danger Hiptop (also known as the T-Mobile Sidekick, at <http://www.danger.com>). The Palm and the RIM devices I reviewed are first-generation wireless PDAs, while the Treo and the SX56 are the latest PDA/phone combo devices with high-speed GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) Internet access. The Danger product provides an interesting alternative, although it wasn't originally designed for business users. Absent from this review were the Palm Tungsten W and the RIM 6210 PDA/phones.

When looks are (almost) everything

If this were a beauty contest, the winners would definitely be the sleek Handspring Treo (a Palm OS device), reminiscent of the original Star Trek (the Old Generation) communicator, and the gleaming Siemens SX56 Pocket PC 2002 with its incredibly crisp display. Both products have strengths, but I was surprised to find that having a pretty face isn't necessarily the most important thing for wireless email, although it will definitely impress your friends. All the devices I reviewed had advantages and disadvantages.

The convenience of having just one device as a PDA and mobile phone is compelling. Unfortunately, the PDA form factor and interface is different from the mobile phone you're used to. If you're comfortable with a hands free kit, the promise of voice activation could make this combination the wave of the future, but today's PDAs don't provide a phone experience anywhere near the level of the top mobile handsets like the Motorola T720 or Ericsson T681. However, they do get the job done, and the PDA interface is great for your address book (although taking notes on your PDA during phone calls can be tricky).

The Handspring Treo

The Handspring Treo, pictured in Figure A, is an elegant and sophisticated device with Macintosh-like ease of use, but its tiny keys are hard to use (especially one-handed), and the phone interface isn't as easy to use as it looks.

FIGURE A



The Handspring Treo is an elegant and sophisticated device.

Replacing the standard silkscreen area found on most Palm OS devices with a RIM-like keyboard is interesting, but it breaks the traditional Palm OS user interface paradigm with questionable benefits. As a Palm OS device, the Treo comes with the (rather antiquated) Palm Desktop PIM (Personal Information Management), including Address Book, Date Book, Memo Pad, and To Do List. However, you could alternately synchronize with Microsoft Outlook or Lotus Notes (using Lotus EasySync) at the desktop.

In terms of Internet access and applications, this device has it all with the Handspring Blazer browser, Treo Mail, and built-in SMS. However, it doesn't come with a bundled Instant Messaging client application or office application suite. As a Palm OS device, the Treo relies on third party applications like Pumatech's Intellisync (at http://www.pumatech.com/is_desktop_main.html), DataViz Documents To Go (at <http://www.dataviz.com/products/documentstogo/index.html>), and IBM Lotus EasySync Pro (at <http://www.lotus.com/products/easysyncpro.nsf>), to work with Microsoft desktop products.

The Siemens SX56

The Siemens SX56, pictured in Figure B, has more power and capacity than any other device, but most of it is used for the Pocket PC 2002 operating system and the Microsoft Pocket Office suite.

FIGURE B



The Siemens SX56 uses the Pocket PC 2002 operating system.

Easy integration with Microsoft desktop applications, including Microsoft Outlook, is a benefit for most companies. It takes a little bit more effort to synchronize the SX56 with Lotus Notes on the desktop since the software that comes with the product doesn't anticipate non-Microsoft configurations. The device itself is a PDA, a mobile phone, and an MP3 player (what every business user needs).

Overall, the SX56 is the best-integrated device in terms of tradeoffs between PDA and phone functionality. The design is straightforward and practical, and it pays off in ease of use. As an email tool, however, the Pocket Outlook application leaves a lot to be desired. It can be difficult to configure for anything but the simplest configurations, so deploying this in a business setting will take some planning. Using the default POP3 (Post Office Protocol v3) email protocol is not secure unless it's used over a VPN (Virtual Private Network).

Just get the job done

For those who don't care about having the latest and greatest devices, there are two old standbys: the RIM 957 and the Palm i705. These are both two-way pagers under the covers, so they lack SMS support and don't provide a true online experience. However, they can send and receive email reliably anywhere in North America, and the batteries can last for weeks unlike devices with bright color displays that measure battery life in hours, not days, of continuous use. When you strip away the bells and whistles (and the MP3 players) these are workhorse devices that get the job done and that are a good companion for your mobile phone. Unlike the high-speed GSM/GPRS devices, if you're outside the range of your mobile operator's network your email will probably still work.

The Palm i705 and the RIM 957 are direct competitors, with one obvious difference. The Palm i705, pictured in Figure C, is a touch screen device with a handwriting area supporting Graffiti notation.

FIGURE C



The Palm i705 is a solid workhorse of a PDA.

The RIM 957 (pictured in Figure D), meanwhile, doesn't support handwriting or have a touch screen. Instead, it sports the famous (or perhaps infamous due to numerous legal disputes) curved RIM keyboard.

FIGURE D



The RIM 957 features the curved RIM keyboard.

Palm brings along a tremendous software bundle (DataViz Documents to Go, a Web browser, AOL Instant Messenger), and all the features of Palm OS. Like the RIM 975, the Palm i705 is locked into a specific network, in this case Palm.Net, and also uses a non-standard type of Palm OS application (the Palm Query Application or PQA) to interface with applications and data over the wireless network. Both RIM and Palm have coverage in roughly 260 metropolitan areas across the U.S.

One part PDA, one part phone, two parts fun

The Danger Hiptop, pictured in Figure E, is a device that appears to have an identity crisis, but this doesn't seem to be a problem for resellers like T-Mobile, or for users, whether they are consumers or professionals.

FIGURE E



The Danger Hiptop is a PDA, a mobile phone, and an MP3 player with the look and feel of a digital camera.

The device is a PDA, a mobile phone, an MP3 player, and it not only has a digital camera look and feel but sports a plug-in CCD camera.

Above all, this device is designed for pure messaging, so much so that it has the worst mobile phone interface of the PDA/phone devices I looked at. But what it lacks in phone integration it more than makes up for in messaging. The generous horizontal swivel display and large keyboard are perfect for SMS, email, and Instant Messaging. The Hiptop has the best messaging interface of all the devices I reviewed.

Although Danger doesn't officially market the product to business users, I talked to one enthusiastic professional user who uses a Hiptop for business email and Instant Messaging. Deployments of products like IBM Lotus Sametime and MSN Messenger on corporate networks make the ability to use Instant Messaging efficiently on a

mobile device more important for business users. On the other hand, the Hiptop doesn't synchronize with the desktop and lacks applications.

Overall, I think the Hiptop is an innovative device for messaging, but IT departments will find it difficult to deploy to business users without desktop PIM integration.

How the devices stack up

While the Handspring Treo and the Siemens SX56 are cutting edge PDA/phones, the Palm i705 and RIM 957 are straightforward email oriented devices. The Danger Hiptop is promising, but it remains to be seen if this device can break into the corporate wireless email space, currently dominated by RIM. In terms of hardware comparisons, I broke down the devices in terms of technologies and core features like display and capacity, as you can see in Table A.

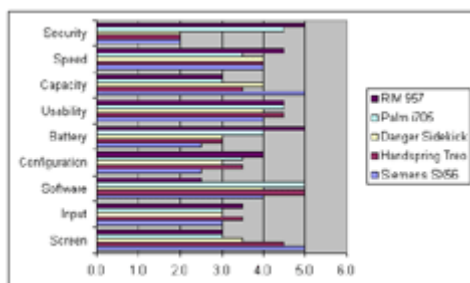
Device	Memory	Display	Keyboard	Wireless	Expandable	IR	USB
Siemens SX56	32MB	Color	No	GSM/GPRS	Yes	Yes	No
Handspring Treo 270	16MB	Color	Yes	GSM/GPRS	No	Yes	Yes
Danger Sidekick	16MB	Grayscale	Yes	GSM/GPRS	No	Yes	Yes
Palm i705	8MB	Monochrome	No	Mobitex	Yes	Yes	(No)
RIM 957	5MB	Monochrome	Yes	Mobitex	No	No	No

In terms of software I wanted to look just mainly at messaging and compare the devices based on email, Web browsing, Instant Messaging, and SMS. None of the devices I looked at literally had it all, but the high-end devices were loaded with messaging features. All of the devices came with PIM applications, but only the Siemens SX56 and the Palm i705 came with bundled office suites to integrate with Microsoft Office on the desktop. See Table B for the complete breakdown.

Device	Email	Web	IM	SMS	Phone	PIM	Office
Siemens SX56	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Handspring Treo 270	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Danger Sidekick	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Palm i705	Yes	(Yes)	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
RIM 957	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

When we put all of this information (and a few of my own opinions) together we can see that no one product dominates in every category. As I pointed out earlier, the devices that focus primarily on email are especially good at it, while the cutting-edge devices get high marks for pretty displays and large capacities but don't outshine more specialized products in their specific niche. In Figure F, you can see how the devices rate by category.

FIGURE F



Device ratings by category.

So what's "the best" device?

The best device for your needs depends on what your needs are. If you need secure reliable wireless email with good coverage in the U.S. and you don't care about anything else, the RIM 957 or a Palm i705 is perfect for you. If you're tired of juggling multiple devices, a PDA/phone combo like the Handspring Treo or Siemens SX56 is worth considering: both are excellent devices with just a few drawbacks like limited battery life and some

usability issues related to PDA/phone integration.

Overall, I found the SX56 to be the most aesthetically appealing device because of its design and display, but the Handspring Treo was packed with more features. I was surprised to find that if I just looked at email functionality, the RIM and the Palm OS devices were better than the PDA/phone devices, and I was pleased with the innovative messaging features of the Danger Hiptop despite its not officially being a business tool.

Product availability and resources

For more information on Palm handhelds, visit <http://www.palm.com>.

For more information on Danger Research, visit <http://www.danger.com>.

For more information on Siemens AG, visit <http://www.my-siemens.com>.

For more information on Handspring, Inc., visit <http://www.handspring.com>.

For more information on the Treo 270, visit <http://www.handspring.com/products/treo270/>.

For more information on Research In Motion, Ltd., visit <http://www.blackberry.com>.

For more information on the RIM 957, visit http://www.blackberry.com/products/rim857_957/index.shtml.

For more information on Pumatech's Intellisync, visit http://www.pumatech.com/is_desktop_main.html.

For more information on DataViz Documents To Go, visit <http://www.dataviz.com/products/documentstogo/index.html>.

For more information on IBM Lotus EasySync Pro, visit <http://www.lotus.com/products/easysyncpro.nsf>

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