

Opinion: The seven lives of Palm computing

Donna Dubinsky

Special to the Mercury News Posted: 07/02/2010 05:26:51 PM PDT Last week, Palm Computing merged into Hewlett-Packard; it is no longer an independent company. Those who have followed Palm's history may recall that Palm has changed ownership numerous times. One might argue that today starts Palm's seventh phase of life:

1. independent company,
2. owned by US Robotics,
3. owned by 3Com,
4. independent company,
5. Handspring merger,
6. Elevation investment,
7. owned by HP.

Over nearly 20 years and through these many corporate transformations, Palm consistently has been a leading innovator. We should pause to applaud the contributions of many amazing people over many years who changed the world and laid the groundwork for a revolution in computing. Palm is a classic Silicon Valley success, creating new markets in the face of uncertainty. Although Palm ultimately did not succeed as an independent company, its influence is all around us.

Palm was founded in January 1992 by Jeff Hawkins, who proclaimed, "The future of personal computing is handheld computing." Few people believed him. At that time, the prerequisites for today's mobile computers did not exist. There was no public Internet, no broadband wireless data, no small color displays, no low-power processors, no lithium batteries, and limited memory. With Jeff's product leadership, along with Ed Colligan and other talented designers, Palm created the first mass-market handheld computer, the PalmPilot, and later one of the leading, breakthrough smartphones, the Treo.

Here are a few of Palm and Handspring's innovations:

- A computer based on synchronization — first with PCs and later with the Web — rather than a stand-alone device, the norm at the time.
- A computer that turned on instantly with the press of a button, going against the trend of bloated software that created a slow user-experience.
- A large-display hand-held computer with a touch interface and no keyboard, with a new way of entering text, called Graffiti.
- A graphic interface for hand-helds where every pixel was analyzed to reduce steps and confusion. Prior hand-held products were character-based.
- The first successful mobile computing developer platform with tens of thousands of applications.
- The Palm V, where style and form factor were as important to users as functionality.
- The Web-enabled Palm VII, in which an application on the device synchronized with data in the background, as is common today.
- One of the first mobile browsers that could view most Web pages in a satisfactory fashion on a small display. Previous approaches were text-based and extremely limited.
- An integrated personal information manager where voice calls could be dialed from an e-mail message and text messages could have photos attached.

- The Treo smartphone, a breakthrough form factor that made the combination phone and handheld computer truly pocketable.
- Web OS, under the direction of Jon Rubenstein, with its unprecedented ability to integrate personal information on the Web with information on the device.

What can explain such a long string of innovation? How did Palm foster this record of achievement? The answer is straightforward: great people and a great culture.

Not everyone can be a product designer. It takes a particular skill set, a depth of understanding of the technology combined with a depth of understanding of the market; these characteristics do not often come together. Palm sought out talented product people, cultivated them, and empowered them.

A great product culture requires an ability to reject conventional wisdom. Time and time again, Palm thought deeply about the right trade-offs for users. When Palm created the Palm V, for example, it made the battery not removable to create a thinner and more beautiful product, a highly controversial decision at the time. The product was wildly successful.

A great product culture also tolerates failure. Palm always developed both evolutionary products — safe products with additional features sought by customers — and revolutionary products, riskier products that might require a few iterations before success. It took three generations of the Treo to create a huge hit.

Palm and Handspring's many innovations have influenced the design and future of the handheld computing, confirming Jeff's insight 20 years ago. Hand-held computing has indeed become the heart and soul of personal computing. Now that Palm is a part of HP, I hope that its seventh life will have as much impact on the world as have the previous six.

Donna Dubinsky, the former CEO and co-founder of Palm and Handspring, is CEO of Numenta. She wrote this article for this newspaper.