

i-technology

Smart Phone Rivals go to Court

Patent suits heat up competition

(AP)— Competition among smart phone makers is heating up at retail, in advertising and, increasingly, in the courtroom as handset and software makers wield patent lawsuits to protect their turf and slow down their rivals.

Just a few years ago, smart phones were mainly for office workers who needed to check e-mail after hours. For most people, the Web browsers and other programs were too much trouble, and the data connections too slow.

Apple Inc. changed all that with the introduction of the iPhone in 2007. Its touch-sensitive screen and



The iPhone 4 (from left), the HTC Droid Incredible, and the Motorola Droid X,

big icons made it easy to use. Its programs were designed from the ground up to work well on the small screen. And the sleek design made it an instant hit with consumers.

Even as competitors have rushed out copycat designs, the iPhone

still sets the agenda.

But that throne is weakening. And as the other devices, including those running Google Inc.'s Android system, catch up with the iPhone, smart phone makers are having a harder time standing out to

consumers or persuading them to pay more for their devices.

In turn, that has prompted a slew of patent disputes over all aspects of basic phone use, from the way a user swipes a touch screen to perform an action to the method a phone uses to extend battery life. Nokia is suing Apple, Apple is suing HTC, Microsoft is suing Motorola and more.

"In consumer electronics and related fields, it's a great challenge to earn a profit," said Bruce Sunstein, an intellectual property lawyer at Sunstein Kann Murphy & Timbers in Boston. "The way you can usually get profit is through innovation."

Smart phone makers must not only come up with novel features,

he said, but must also stake claims to the technology behind them and thus reap the rewards in licensing fees.

Consumers shouldn't worry about buying or using any of those phones. Patent cases can take months or years to resolve — sometimes longer than the life of these phones — and disputes are often settled with licensing deals.

Ultimately, no one company will prevail. Rather, the results will determine how profits are divvied up among a vast number of players.

It's a pool of money that's growing as smart phone sales balloon. Research group IDC expects global smart phone shipments of 270 million in 2010, a 55 percent increase from last year.

Kids go on Expensive Buying Sprees

Free downloads lead to credit card charges

(AP)— "The Smurfs' Village," a game for the iPhone and other Apple gadgets, was released a month ago and quickly became the highest-grossing application in the



Kelly Rummelhart and her son, Sawyer, 4, who unwittingly racked up nearly \$70 in purchases on 'The Smurfs' Village' game he played on her iPad, are seen in their home in Gridley, Calif. (AP photo)

iTunes store. Yet it's free to download.

So where does the money come from? Kelly Rummelhart of Gridley, Calif., has part of the answer. Her 4-year-old son was using her iPad to play the game and racked up \$66.88 in charges on her credit card without knowing what he was doing.

Rummelhart had no idea that it

was possible to buy things — buy them with real money — inside the game. In this case, her son bought one bushel and 11 buckets of "Smurfberries," tokens that speed up gameplay.

"Really, my biggest concern was them scratching the screen. Never

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