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'Usability' issues cost mobile industry US$4.5bn a year

By Lorraine Turner, Total Telecom
17 July 2006

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Around 63% of returned handsets do not have a fault, survey finds; email/WAP set-up is biggest headache for users.

Nearly two thirds of mobile devices returned to the manufacturer are not faulty, costing the global mobile industry up to US$4.5 billion a year according to a new study from WDSGlobal.

Despite one in seven phones being returned within the first year of purchase (based on statistics from Which 2005), around 63% are not actually faulty. In fact, they are returned because users simply don't know how to set up services properly.

The damage to the U.K. industry alone reaches £54 million based on an average device costing £35, the survey commented. It concluded that manufacturers should invest further in optimising device software in order to overcome such usability issues.

Following the analysis of 15,000 monthly calls made to a support line in May 2006 from a major U.K. retailer, the most common reason for users returning handsets is a problem with settings and configuration, or struggling with the functionality of the device and its applications.

More specifically, subscribers complain about problems with connecting to services such as WAP, email or sending MMS. The second-largest problem is PC to mobile connectivity.

Many devices are sold "unconfigured" with even "out-of-the-box" type services requiring users to set up services such as email.

According to a separate research study carried out in the Netherlands, if users cannot manually set-up or configure a service such as email after 20 minutes then they are likely to abandon it.

Furthermore, 8.11% of users returned devices because they did not meet their expectations, pointing to a problem with a lack of training amongst mobile retailers.

A WDSGlobal mystery shopper survey showed that only 20% of retail staff could provide an accurate description of BlackBerry functionality, for example.

"Most mobile retailers prefer to favour the promotion of specific brands, models or special offers and are failing to recognise customer requirements," said Doug Overton, head of communications at WDSGlobal.

Meanwhile, out of devices returned for genuine faults, 24.04% were based on hardware problems and 12.31% for software problems.

The level of mobile phones returned is 13% higher than returns in the consumer electronics sector.

"The mobile phone has become the poor relation to its consumer electronics cousins. MP3 players, digital cameras and mobile gaming devices all generally provide a more fulfilling out of box experience to the consumer," said Overton.

Although operators and handset manufacturers write off the cost of returns as overheads associated with a new launch, brand loyalty and subscriber churn are adversely affected.

"The industry needs to look at the causes behind this trend and take positive action to improve the general out of box experience for the mobile subscriber," said Overton.

WDSGlobal is a data service support company for the mobile industry.

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