

THIS YEAR'S BIGGEST EVENT FOR THE COUNTRY'S BIGGEST BUILDERS, SEE PAGE 100

HOMeward BOUND:
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WOUNDED IN IRAQ

See page 156

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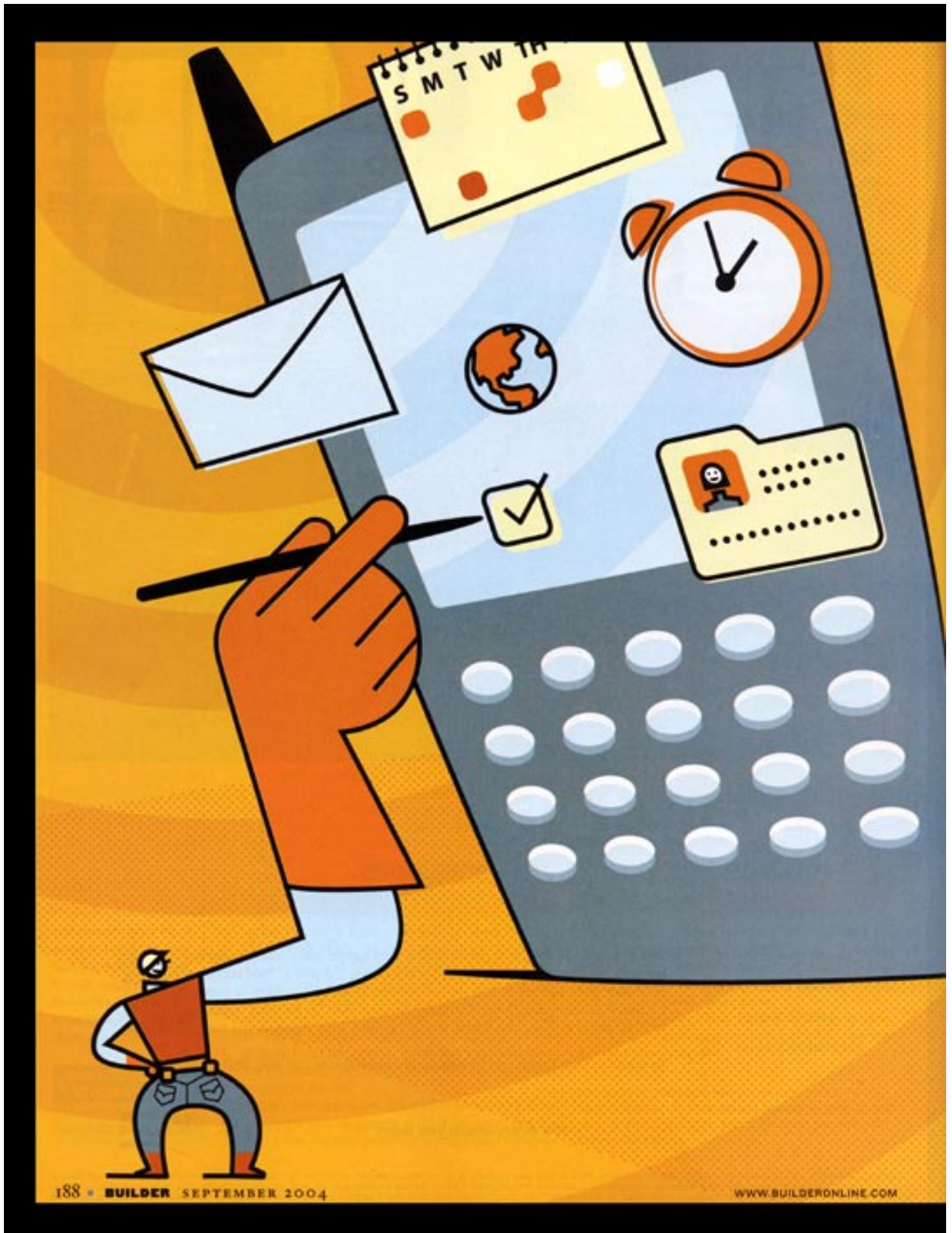
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GREAT COMMUNICATORS

THE LATEST SMARTPHONES LET BUILDERS USE ONE GADGET FOR EVERYTHING—FROM A PERSONAL ORGANIZER TO A TOOL THAT SERVES AS A PHONE, E-MAIL DEVICE, AND WEB SURFER.

A HOME BUILDER WITH A SMARTPHONE is still rare, but slowly, and sometimes with great measures of success, builders are deploying the latest crop of smartphones.

The two smartphones builders report they use to run business applications are the Treo 600 from palmOne, which is available from AT&T Wireless, Cingular Wireless, Sprint, and T-Mobile, and the BlackBerry from Research in Motion, most notably Nextel's BlackBerry 7510.

Builders are using Treos to run task management software such as Palm applications, usually PunchList from Strata Systems and Etails from GlobalSoft. On the BlackBerry side, Nextel is now selling a number of applications as added services, including Corrigo's warranty management program, a mobile workforce management service based on a Global Positioning System (GPS) from Xora, and change-order management and scheduling software from BuildLinks.

Kevin Burden, program manager for research group IDC's Mobile Devices Services, says of the 9 million smartphones shipped in 2003, less than 20 percent were purchased by corporate information technology departments for business use. When asked what percentage of the market is construction and home building, Burden says, "I'd be surprised if it was more than 2 percent."

Still, builders are watching the smartphone industry's progress closely, and some have taken action.

Scott Shimberg, executive vice president of Hyde Park Builders in Tampa, Fla., says his company rolled out 10 Nextel BlackBerrys with BuildLinks across multiple job titles, including project managers, field supers, salespeople, and administrators. Hyde Park is one of 20 builders that deployed BuildLinks on Nextel BlackBerrys when the alliance between BuildLinks and Nextel launched this past summer.

"The problem we had was getting the field to disseminate information to the back-office when our field workers have no data
(see page 190)

BY STEVE ZURIER



PRODUCT: BlackBerry
MANUFACTURER: Research In Motion
CARRIERS: Nextel 7510; AT&T 7780; Verizon Wireless 7750; Cingular 7280; T-Mobile 7230
PRICE: \$350 (with \$200 rebate)
DIMENSIONS: 4.4" x 2.95" x 1.02"
WEIGHT: 5.8 ounces
BATTERY: Lithium Ion
FEATURES: E-mail, cell phone/DirectConnect (Nextel's with push-to-talk feature), organizer, Web browser, Java applications, speakerphone, VibraCall, color screen, keyboard

communications available on undeveloped jobsites," says Shimberg, who notes that Hyde Park annually builds 30 to 50 upscale townhomes and accompanying town centers, about 10 custom homes, and roughly 25 semi-custom homes.

"There was a disconnect, so we needed a browser and an Internet connection," says Shimberg. "This technology lets us leverage our assets competitively against larger builders."

Now, selections and change orders can be pushed to the field, supers can keep production schedules updated remotely so customers and back-office administrators can view the progress of a job, and supers can sign off on purchase orders from the field. The e-mail



PRODUCT: Treo 600
MANUFACTURER: palmOne
CARRIER: Sprint PCS, AT&T Wireless, Cingular Wireless, T-Mobile
PRICE: \$450 (with \$150 rebate from Sprint PCS)
DIMENSIONS: 4.4" x 2.4" x 0.9"
WEIGHT: 6.2 ounces
BATTERY: Lithium Polymer
FEATURES: E-mail, camera, cell phone, Web browser, Palm applications, speakerphone, color screen, keyboard, stylus

function on the BlackBerrys is also a huge time-saver, Shimberg says. The investment cost Hyde Park about \$10,000 for 10 BlackBerrys, one e-mail server, and installation by a local technology consultant.

PUNCH IN

Custom builders are typically small operations with just two or three employees, so it would be unlikely that a custom builder would ever make an investment in nearly a dozen BlackBerrys and an e-mail server.

Steven Kendrick, president of Structures Building Co. in Mt. Pleasant, S.C., which builds about 20 custom and spec homes annually, runs Strata's PunchList on a Treo 600 from Cingular. Kendrick initially thought about buying a couple of additional Treos for his supers but opted to have the supers run PunchList on Zire 72 handhelds from palmOne, the latest Zire model with wireless Bluetooth capabilities. The main reason is cost: Treos run about \$450 from Sprint with a rebate; Zires cost about \$269 with a rebate. "Eventually, we will go to Bluetooth phones, but doing it this way allows me to spread out the investment," Kendrick says.

Structures Building Co. is using PunchList on a Treo in the following three ways:

- **Pre-start checklist.** Kendrick creates a checklist of nearly 100 pre-start activities, including pre-checks of temporary power sources, the framing, and foundation.

- **Scheduling work items.** Kendrick can use PunchList to let subcontractors know that they need them to come out to the site on a specific date. With the Treo, Kendrick can update on the fly and simply fax out work requests at the end of the day, when he gets back to the office. Supers with a Zire 72 can use the device's Bluetooth features to wirelessly download all the schedule information into their computers in the office. There's no more need to hot sync with a cradle.

- **Final walk-throughs.** Structures Building is using the original PunchList walk-through application.

Kendrick says he's working with Strata Systems to integrate PunchList with his company's MasterBuilder back-office system. He says the goal is for him to sign off on a job in the field on a Treo and initiate an automated pay process within MasterBuilder. PunchList can do this with FAST and BuildSoft Enterprise, but Dan Hampton, president of Strata, says while requests to integrate PunchList and MasterBuilder are infrequent, Strata does have plans to integrate with the financial functions of MasterBuilder.

JUMP-START

The use of smartphones in the building industry will get a real jump-start if big builders (see page 192)



PRODUCT: i700 Pocket PC
MANUFACTURER: Samsung
CARRIER: Verizon Wireless
PRICE: \$800 (with two-year service contract)
DIMENSIONS: 5.2" x 2.8" x 0.8"
WEIGHT: 6.9 ounces
BATTERY: Lithium Ion
FEATURES: E-mail, camera, cell phone, Web browser, Pocket PC applications, speakerphone, voice recognition software, color screen, stylus

such as Hovnanian Enterprises succeed in their plans to roll out the devices.

Frank Gonzalez, Hovnanian's systems analyst in charge of production and customer service, says the No. 9 builder on this year's BUILDER 100 list is looking to roll out 600 BlackBerry 7510s to supers and customer service and quality assurance employees in 11 states.

Gonzalez says Hovnanian is installing BuildPro scheduling software from Hyphen Solutions in the BlackBerries. The BuildPro rollout will start on Dec. 1 in California. Hovnanian tested three of the devices internally over the summer.

"We want our supers out of the office checking quality, making sure schedules stay accurate and updated," says Gonzalez, who adds that the BlackBerries can potentially be a tremendous improvement over having supers hot synch a Palm device in a trailer with a cradle.

"Those cradles become problematic quickly," he says. "Dirt gets in the devices, and they don't synch properly. It's a big frustration, which is why we're trying to get something that would give us a wireless connection."

The other major BlackBerry application under way is for Hovnanian's service technicians to use Corrigo's application on BlackBerries to receive scheduling information and appointment details out in the field. The company plans to roll out the Corrigo warranty management application to 15 communities in New Jersey this fall.

"We are at a point now where it's worth taking a shot," says Gonzalez. "The technology won't do everything we want, but after being patient for so many years, we're moving forward with it."

ALTERNATE APPROACH

Running applications such as BuildLinks, BuildPro, or PunchList on a smartphone may be ideal for many builders, but there are other options.

Gary Roerig, systems analyst and BuildPro project manager at M/I Homes in Columbus, Ohio, No. 19 on the BUILDER 100 list, says he's looking at setting up Tablet PCs with wireless cellular cards to about 200 users. Roerig says attempts to roll out BlackBerries and IPAQ handhelds stumbled at M/I, largely because he didn't want to institute a separate e-mail server to manage BlackBerries for multiple users. And his supers didn't like the IPAQs, complaining about the small size of the units.

"We tried the IPAQs, but the guys didn't like them," Roerig says. "With the tablets, they have a 12-inch screen and a full-sized keyboard, plus they can run all the Microsoft Office applications."

Roerig says he's tested BuildPro on 10 Tablet PCs in the Columbus region. He likes the setup because his supers are accessing the scheduling application over the Internet as opposed to the corporate network. Roerig says this is preferable because having the supers access the information on an outsourced server keeps traffic off the corporate network and reduces the potential for viruses.

LONG HAUL

Builders may well spend the next three or four years sorting out and testing handheld technologies before they settle on the solution that works best for their company. Since so many builders are Nextel customers already, upgrading to a BlackBerry 7510 and signing on with a warranty management, punch list, or a GPS application will be easier for them.

On the other hand, the Treo is not just a phone but also a Palm device, so that will hold some appeal, especially for tech-savvy builders who like using Palm applications.

Our advice: Ask the carriers if you can test the devices before buying. If you have builder colleagues who are using a BlackBerry or a Treo, ask them to show you how the applications run. Test the keyboard, make a phone call, and send an e-mail to see how fast the response time is. Check how the product feels in your hands. Some people like the compactness of the Treo. Others like the larger screen and sizable keyboard on the BlackBerry. Many others, particularly project supers, will still reject smartphones, claiming that the keyboards on the smartphones are too small, or simply that it's not as comfortable as a phone. Remember that no one device delivers everything and surfing Web pages is limited. At some point, you just have to stop fretting and make a choice. ■

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