And Then There Were Three: Android, Apple iOS, and Windows Phone

By Paul Thurrott

Last week, I wrote about my initial experiences with Google's Android smartphone OS and the well-designed Motorola DROID X, triggering an avalanche of feedback and commentary. As you might expect, it was all over the map, with some condemnation from the Apple crowd, some very helpful tips from Android converts (thanks for those), and a slew of questions about what this all means to Windows Phone 7 and the other contenders in the smartphone wars.

There are no easy answers here. But I think we can come to some basic understanding about what it means to be a smartphone, circa late 2010, which platforms make the grade, and what this all means for IT.

For some reason, this is controversial in certain circles, but as far as I'm concerned it's just common sense. Smartphones, like PCs before them, have evolved over time. So while a phone that offered, say, email access in 2006 might have been considered a smartphone, the bar has raised significantly since then. Some want to term these newer, high-end devices as "super phones." Rubbish, I say. The name is the same, but how we grade these devices changes over time.

Today's smartphones require the following features and functionality:

- Push
- Over-the-air access to multiple email, contacts, and calendar accounts
- A modern, full-fledged development environment and platform for developers to target
- A way to deploy, market, and monetize apps through an online store
- Advanced hardware features like fast CPUs and GPUs, accelerometers, and multi-touch screens
- A way to manage the phone's features, through policies, so that these useful devices aren't used against businesses

Today, many regard Nokia Symbian as the world's number one smartphone platform, but I feel that this aging and rarely updated system doesn't even qualify as a smartphone using reasonable modern standards like those outlined above.

What we're left with are Google Android, Apple iOS (iPhone, iPod touch, iPad), Microsoft Windows Phone 7, and Research in Motion (RIM) BlackBerry. Each of these platforms meets the criteria established above, and when you consider which platforms constitute modern platforms, these are the real choices.

Of course, it's more complicated than that. Simply establishing your technical credibility doesn't mean you make the grade. That's why HP Palm webOS isn't on the list. On paper, Palm did all the right things when it created webOS, at least from a technical perspective, and its plan to base the development environment on well understood web technologies

seemed like a good one. But the company was struggling by this point and didn't have the resources to get webOS widely adopted. As a result, I feel that webOS is on the way out, though that could change with HP's largess now backing the company. Frankly, I doubt it.

RIM BlackBerry, too, is a long shot, which might seem odd given that it's currently the number one smartphone platform in the US. But as is the case with Nokia—which is number one worldwide—RIM's early dominance of the

market doesn't guarantee future success, and the company has been a follower, not a leader, since the iPhone appeared in 2007. So yes it hit all the bullet points, but one gets the feeling that RIM is a company already in retreat. It never would have pursued touch screens, multimedia features, or an online store with any alacrity if not pushed to do so.

Compared to Apple, the other smartphone platform makers are all followers. Its iOS system, popularized by the iPhone, will remain the safe choice going forward, with the most curated and protected ecosystem, and the largest base of content, both apps and digital media.

Google, which is poised to dominated the smartphone world with its Android platform is essentially cheating to do so, stealing the best parts of Microsoft's and Apple's playbooks while also stealing, according to Oracle, the Java system required to make it happen. Android is like a plague of locusts, messy but unstoppable.

And Microsoft screwed up its smartphone platform so badly it had to literally start over from scratch. I like what it's done with Windows Phone 7 though, and think it's got a smart design, solid underpinnings and, go figure, the superior underlying platform and developer environment. The company's decision to promote the cross-platform possibilities of this environment is particularly smart.

Looking forward, my take on all this is that Android, iOS, and Windows Phone will be the smartphone platforms that matter because only these three environments offer first-class experiences across all the criteria I previously established. RIM will remain popular with businesses largely out of inertia, but it will never gain internationally like it did in the US. HP will see nothing but failure with webOS; it's just too late. And I wouldn't be surprised to see Nokia abandon Symbian and become the biggest Windows Phone partner in the world.

Looking ahead, I plan to rate these three most important systems against each other. I'm particularly interested in the ever-evolving ways in which they support corporate policies, which prevent smartphones from being used as weapons against the companies that deploy them. Ultimately, the market will decide which of these platforms is the most popular. For now, what I'm most interested in is which is the most worthy, both for you as an individual and for the environments you manage. But I think it's down to those three.