



Tech Talk

The End of Blackberry

As We Know It? ©

by John McCarthy

Hi everyone, a warm welcome to TechTalk, and bad times for Blackberry who've just decided to pull the plug on its Classic keyboard smartphone. Lovers of thumb-typing still maintain that these keyboards offer the best experience and tactile sensation on a mobile phone. Probably the end of an era. It's not just the end of a particular model; to be perfectly clear it's the sad but predictable demise of the last BlackBerry phone with the almost square screen and traditional physical keyboard that dominates the face of the phone. It's not the last BlackBerry model with a physical keyboard, as The Passport will continue on sale at least for the foreseeable future, and you can still purchase the BlackBerry Priv, an Android based device with a sliding keyboard.

Whether you like them or not – personally, I've owned two BBs, the Bold 9900 and the Q10, beautifully crafted models that oozed quality, both of which ticked all the right boxes at the time – BlackBerrys have always been quasi-cult devices, inspiring a kind of demonic devotion from its followers not too dissimilar to Apple products, but just in smaller numbers. Let's not forget that at one point, BlackBerry and not Apple was the celebrity fruit of choice. The newly defunct Classic model featured the raised-button keyboard so beloved by all BlackBerry aficionados, combined with a touch-screen. It was the company's first serious attempt to fuse touch input with its customary QWERTY (or, in our case, AZERTY) keyboard, but alas it never succeeded in appealing to many outside its loyal fan base.

It's hard to believe that back in the noughties the BlackBerry was the smartphone to have in the business and political world. Barack Obama more or less endorsed the device during his 2008 presidential campaign; on most days, it was fastened to his belt, revolver style, a hi-tech Lucky Luke ready to draw quicker than his shadow. More recently, Hillary Clinton's e-mail scandal revealed that the current Presidential hopeful had declined to employ specially set up secure computers just so she could keep using her personal BlackBerry to send personal and professional emails. We now know just how potentially damaging that was. Other celebrities whose names were/ are

inextricably linked to the BlackBerry brand: Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian, Justin Timberlake, Christina Aguilera; and let's not forget the untold users and one of the biggest group of Blackberry fans over the years: government workers and many of the world's large banks and companies. President Obama, US Senators and many others have now all had to abandon their treasured possessions.

In reality, BlackBerry's handset has been in a state of decline for quite a while, and the company announced a quarterly loss of 650 million dollars recently; half a million smartphones were sold, about 100,000 fewer than the previous quarter. No need to be a rocket scientist to surmise that the Classic just hasn't been selling well enough to justify its continued production.

Truth to tell BlackBerry devices have been declining in usage ever since the introduction of the iPhone nearly ten years ago. To illustrate the decline in popularity, one only has to look at the statistics: Blackberry has seen its market share of the U.S. mobile device market crash from over 50 percent in 2007 to less than 1% in the first quarter of 2016, and have thus more or less been forced to bow to the inevitable.

No doubt there will be some wailing and gnashing of teeth among the BlackBerry diehard faithful, but the company is expected to release three new Android-powered devices this year, and one of the designs will allegedly include an old-school keyboard.

Companies come and go, even long-established and reputable ones: remember Compaq, Enron, Woolworth's, Pan Am, DeLorean; it would be a pity if Blackberry suffered a similar fate. There are signs that in order to avoid this, BB is turning its attention away from hardware towards its burgeoning software business. The decline of its traditional handset has been slow but inexorable and brings to mind John Donne's most famous lines: "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee".