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## It's OK Not to Use a Smartphone

Flip phones and candybar phones have a niche with people seeking simplicity and low prices



By **GEOFFREY A. FOWLER**

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Here's something the high-tech world doesn't readily admit: It's OK not to use a smartphone.

Americans are actually buying more flip phones, candybar phones and other 2000s throwbacks. Last year 24.2 million so-called feature phones shipped in the U.S., nearly 2 million more than the year before, according to research firm IDC.

Wait, is an 'NSYNC reunion in the works, too?

This isn't about pretentious Luddites switching to "dumbphones" to complement their waxed mustaches. Every week, I receive mail from Journal readers asking me to recommend a simple phone. Nine years after the dawn of the iPhone, roughly one in seven Americans isn't buying into the new dogma that a smartphone is the answer to everything.

So for the past week, I've put away my apps and lived with some of the frustratingly few basic phones you can still buy in the U.S. Going cold turkey on smartphones wasn't easy for a guy who basks in the glow of touch screens. I rely on my iPhone to get to and from work, pay for things, find food and perform an alarming number of other basic survival

tasks.

## Back to Basics

The smartphone revolution hasn't reached everyone. In the U.S. last year, there was an increase in shipments of basic "feature" phones. Here are some of the best flip phones and candy bars out now.



Yet from the moment I ditched it, I felt more focused and relaxed. I didn't worry what might be buzzing on my smartphone. And I rarely had to recharge a phone.

"For me, more is not better," says Melinda Miller-Klopfer, a 32-year-old writer and dance teacher in Mendocino, Calif., who has used a flip phone since 2011 that handles all the communication she really wants on the go. "I resent the judgment that I must be dumb because my phone is," she told me.

Finding people like her who swear by basic phones is surprisingly easy. Among them are people on a budget, retirees seeking security, families preparing for emergencies and professionals looking to unplug.

## Cheap Rules

The flip phone's greatest appeal: It costs less. The most popular smartphones have a

starting price of \$650, plus service charges upward of \$80 a month. You can get a flip phone for as little as \$7.50. That's the Best Buy price of ZTE's Z222, which works with AT&T's GoPhone prepaid service costing as little as \$30 a month. I've paid more for movie tickets, Junior Mints and a pink lemonade Icee.

If you're seeking a phone to just cover basics, there's probably an LG in your future. The brand dominates the budget lineup at the biggest carriers. If I had to buy a dumbphone, I'd pick Verizon's \$50 LG Revere 3 because of its simple buttons and menus. AT&T sells the \$50 LG B470, and its sister carrier, Cricket, sells the \$30 LG True—similar phones with a "senior mode" to make audio clearer.

These flip phones make fine calls and you can type numbers or look up contacts with ease. Don't expect call quality superior to smartphones, but it's nice that the microphone sits so close to your mouth. Whatever model you choose, make sure it runs on a 3G network, which carriers have promised to keep around for a while.



The \$50 SpareOne phone is emergency kit-ready. It runs on AA batteries and costs \$25 a year for AT&T service. *PHOTO: LEAH LATELLA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

## Take That, iPhone

It's easy to list what smartphones can do that dumbphones can't. But all these phones did things my iPhone cannot. I've been blissfully untethered from a charger, because these flip phones stand by for calls for weeks—seriously, up to 15 days—on a single charge.

There's even a basic phone that runs on AA batteries you just pop in. The \$50 SpareOne Emergency Phone, a candy-bar style, can sit in your car trunk or earthquake kit so it will be there when there's no other power available. It's for calling, not texting, but you can set up a button that sends texts and emails to emergency contacts with your GPS location.

Flip phones also can take a beating. The cheapest ones will merely bounce where an iPhone screen would shatter. For extra active, or extra clumsy, users, there are purpose-built rugged models. I dropped the Samsung Convoy 4 (\$192 at Verizon) and Kyocera DuraXE (\$270 at AT&T) from 4 feet onto concrete. No scratches. These phones are bulkier than other models but say they meet military specifications for resistance to shock, temperature, water and even solar radiation.

What else can't my iPhone do? Make that satisfying thwack when you close it. The flip phone shape is still the closest thing we have to Star Trek's communicator. The slim LG Exalt II, \$192 from Verizon, echoes the once-popular Motorola Razr.

## Trade-Offs



Kyocera DuraXE (\$270 at AT&T) is a rugged basic phone that claims to meet military specs for shock resistance, temperature, water and even solar radiation. *PHOTO: LEAH LATELLA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

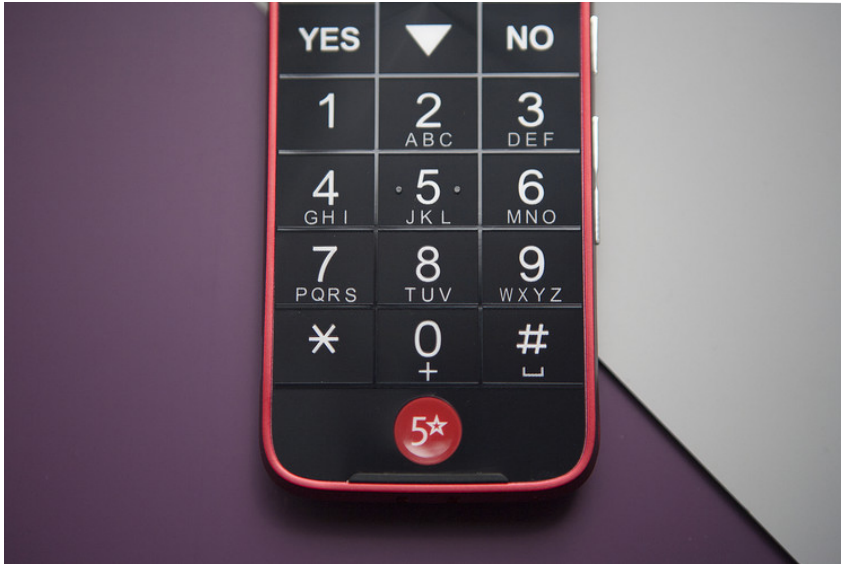
It isn't all flipping happy: I could do without all the thumb tapping, for one. Designed in a world without touch screens, many basic phones have held on to their confusing array of buttons. I gave my thumb a workout, converting the numeric keypad into letters to bang out text messages. It's a skill I mastered in 2003 but now feels utterly painful. (Who ever thought it was a good idea to cram four letters—PQR and S—on the number 7?)

These phones have low-quality cameras and limited, if any, Web browsers: If you want either, you're better off with a smartphone. And you can't see, or send, emojis; you're stuck with an old-fashioned :(.

Most important, without a smartphone, you're keeping yourself from accessing vital tools like iMessage or Skype, streaming music and services like Uber—all lifelines for families and people of all ages. Without my smartphone, I became a mooch on my friends.

## Reinventing Basic

Not all basic phones have been stuck in amber since 2004. The biggest reinvention, and my favorite of the lot, is GreatCall's just-released \$75 Jitterbug Flip. Targeted at seniors, it's a study in simplicity. There are extra-large keys and a bright screen, and it replaces tap-tap-tapping through a field of tiny icons with very clear text menus you select with a "yes" or "no." My two quibbles: There's no battery indicator on the lock screen or main screen—and you'll probably want to charge it daily, because its advanced tech uses more power than other flip phones.



Targeted at seniors with its bright screen and extra-large keys, the \$75 Jitterbug Flip is a study in simplicity. For a \$25 monthly fee, there's a concierge medical and support service called 5Star. *PHOTO: LEAH LATELLA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Behind the scenes, the Jitterbug Flip is actually a smartphone running on the latest 4G data network. Advanced services contribute to the simplicity: Press 0, and you're connected with an actual operator—an on-demand helper, who shows you how to use your phone, and can even add names to your phone's address book for you. For a \$25 monthly fee, there's a concierge medical and support service called 5Star.

And basic doesn't have to mean going down-market. The \$295 Punkt MP01, designed by Jasper Morrison and sold online, is the priciest dumbphone I tried. It's also the ultimate antidote to distractions, the Kindle of phones. There's no camera or Internet access. It can do standby for four weeks. When someone is trying to call or text you, it demands your attention with a gentle bird call.

One important caveat: The MP01 runs on older 2G networks, so may soon not work on the AT&T network. Punkt recommends T-Mobile.

Since I didn't have my work email and messaging apps on the MP01, I actually made... phone calls. That was surprisingly lovely. And without the urge to keep looking at my phone, I finally made it through a whole issue of the New Yorker!

The evolution of smarter devices will continue. But that doesn't mean the do-it-all touch-screen slab is the only phone of the future. In Asia, handset makers including LG and Samsung have continued to refine the flip phone, even bestowing it with Android smarts. Some of the best innovations of 2016 skip the touch screen for more natural interactions, like talking.



The \$295 Punkt MP01 has no camera or Internet access; it revels in simplicity, calling your attention to a call or text with a gentle bird call. *PHOTO: LEAH LATELLA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

I can envision a world where you don't need a smartphone, just a little plastic conduit to your digital world. Speak to it—"Hello, Siri?"—and it will do your bidding... and still only need to be charged once a month.



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