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Man-machine interface gets reworked at CTIA Wireless

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Start-ups promote novel designs for data input as operators acknowledge need for easier use of data services. Easier ways to input data into mobile devices is a key theme at this week's CTIA Wireless show in New Orleans, with several manufacturers introducing different methods. At the same time, mobile operator held their hands up over mobile data services, admitting that the industry could do more to make services more intuitive and easier to use for consumers. Data inputting issues were addressed by start-ups such as Texas-based Frogpad, which launched a new version of its keyboard for portable data devices, including handsets, PDAs, tablet and wearable PCs. The company's keyboard is 14cm by 9cm and features a new layout using just 19 keys. The idea is it can be used with one hand and it is envisaged the solution will be particularly useful to professionals who need to input data in the field. The company maintains it takes 10 hours of training to get up to 40 words per minute. Many of the major handset manufacturers are also experimenting with new keypad designs. Siemens' SX1 model uses an unusual distribution of alpha-numerical keys either side of the oversized screen while Nokia's 3650 camera phone uses a distribution of keys that is reminiscent of old rotary dial phones. The Qwerty keyboard inherited from the days of the typewriter is also being incorporated with Nokia's new 3300 music phone and the 6800 messaging-centric device. Also reworking the man-machine interface is a company called Digit Wireless, which announced on Monday a partnership with messaging company LogicaCMG. The company's new Fastap keyboard for phones is aimed to remove the need for triple-tap entry. A key for each letter of the alphabet is arranged around the number keys in a series of miniature hills and larger valleys taking up a space no bigger than the keypads in use in today's smaller phone models. Digit Wireless has also announced relationships with Canadian carrier Telus Mobility and handset manufacturer Panasonic and is in discussions with multiple chip manufacturers and operating system companies. The company said a phone using the technology will be on the market by the end of the year. Improving the interface with mobile devices is a key part of the effort to make data services easier to use for consumers. During keynotes at the CTIA show, Dave McGlade, president of U.K.-based mobile operator mm02, and Sprint PCS president Len Lauer both admitted that more could be done in this area by the industry. Indeed Sprint announced a new camera phone from Sanyo at the show that allows users to send a voice file with their photos. Tom Wheeler, president of the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association (CTIA), noted that operators in Japan and Korea are finding ARPUs are doubling where the user has a colour screen. But the overwhelming message at the CTIA event was that handsets have now become multimedia devices, no longer used just for voice and basic data services. The trade organisation said it has decided to rename its autumn show as CTIA Wireless IT & Entertainment 2003 in recognition of the growing role of "m-ertainment."

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