

COLUMNS

13 days with a feature phone

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I lost my iPhone on Saturday, Sept. 8 getting out of a yellow New York cab, stretching out over a puddle.

Bonobos makes great pants – but some cuts are afflicted by dangerously shallow pockets. This day was inevitable, but thankfully the 13 days that followed were surprisingly valuable to me as a mobile marketer. It also did not hurt that I knew Apple would be announcing the iPhone 5 the following Wednesday.

That 50 percent quote

In our industry we have taken to calling non-smartphones feature phones or, derisively, dumbphones. The truth probably lies somewhere in between, but that is not the point. Fifty percent of Americans still use these old fashioned mobile phones – devices that make calls, send text messages and, yes, download expensive ringtones.

When someone asks me why any business would send text messages to their customers when there are so many richer options – applications, mobile Web sites, mobile ads, even MMS – my stock answer has been: You cannot forget that 50 percent of Americans still use phones that cannot do any of these great things.

The exact percentage has been slowly falling over the past couple of years, but the basic point has held.

That said, I have been defending SMS marketing so often, for so long, with this quote, that lately when I heard myself uttering it, I found myself cringing. After spending 13 days with a feature phone, that quote resonates with me in a way that it never had before.

Detrimental

After five years of iPhones, I had forgotten what it is like to be without always-on access to email, my calendar and the mobile Web.

I did cheat at times by carrying around my LTE-enabled iPad, but for 13 days I was, when away from a computer, cut off.

Work does not end when I leave the office, and emails would often go unanswered for hours.

Google calendar, synced to every device I own, tracks and reminds me about five to 10 events every day via those unavailable emails.

For the first time in years I found myself trying to remember a schedule. I had some success with this, but the greater effect was that I found myself perpetually distracted, always wondering if I was forgetting something.

If you have read Charlie Stross' "Accelerando" and other sci-fi novels with similar concepts, you have seen a future where humans are dependent upon devices that augment their own mental abilities and offload memories via always-on Internet connections.

In Accelerando, the protagonist is robbed of this device, and he is absolutely lost. We are not nearly there yet, but compared to the last time I owned a feature phone, that sort of future now seems perfectly reasonable.

Did I freak out about losing a device that contained so much personal information?

For about 30 seconds – and then I grabbed a friend's laptop and revoked the Dropbox access token, revoked email and calendar access via the Google 2 factor settings page, and then set about, unsuccessfully, tracking and then wiping the device via Apple's Find My Phone.

Why every mobile marketer should buy a burner

The morning after I lost the phone I purchased the cheapest phone AT&T offered – something called the 'AT&T U2800A – GoPhone.'

The phone is barebones to the point that it does not even include T9 or some form of predictive texting software. If I wanted to type an 'S' it was four taps of the 7 key.

Over the following 13 days I relied on this phone to text and talk – nothing more.

With this phone in my pocket, walking around Manhattan was eye-opening: Ads on bus shelters encouraging me to tap my NFC-enabled phone to download content; QR Codes everywhere – that in many cases, ironically just spawned a text message; and ads promoting single-use-case, brand specific apps.

Do you really need to use one of these technologies when you are building your next mobile campaign?

Or are you using them because you can, and because you cannot imagine a world where your target consumer actually uses a phone that can do no more than text and talk?

Look at the goal you are trying to accomplish. If a simple text messaging call-to-action will do the trick, do not overlook the old-fashioned option – and the 150 million Americans with feature phones in their pockets for whom this is the only option.

If you work in mobile, chances are you own a smartphone.

For \$20 you can see how the other half uses their mobile phones. Using a feature phone is a hassle, but it is a hassle you should put up with, if only for a week. It is a small investment of time and money that is well worth the reward of invaluable perspective.

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