

Marketing to the uninterested

By [Steve Smith](#)

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The other day, and for the tenth time in the last year, I showed my mother how to answer her cellphone.

"It never rings when people call me, and then later it tells me I have voice mail."

Stupidly, I ask, "Is it turned on?"

"I don't know. What is *on*?" Apparently she was shutting the phone down before closing it, so everything kicked over to voice mail.

Tech-averse but far from doddering, Mom is not that far off the charts. My fiancée is a computer scientist who could care less about the features on the cellphone I gave her. Forgetting myself entirely the other day I texted her. She called me immediately. "Someone is sending me a text message. What do I do?" she asked.

"Well, first of all, don't panic. Steady breaths."

"You're not helping."

"You're a computer scientist. Why is this hard to figure out?"

"Honey, that thing you see passing before your eyes right now? That is your defunct sex life."

Indifference to the feature sets on most cellphones is not necessarily generational, either. My text-happy daughter ignores the mobile Web entirely. It intrudes on her SMS exchanges.

We in the mobile media and marketing realms tend to live in a self-serving, self-satisfied bubble. We forget that many, many consumers feel a bit besieged by technology. Even supposedly bleeding-edge mobilistas like my daughter bring to their phone experience a specific purpose. The rest is just clutter — and tech freaks like Dad talking to one another.

A recent *Mobile TV and Video Survey* from QuickPlay Media reminds us of the general public's lack of native enthusiasm for mobile media. The lead talking point from this study in the press has been the low awareness surrounding mobile TV. Based on a pretty paltry 500 person base of 18- to 34-year-olds, the survey found 47% of mobile customers didn't even know if their carrier offered mobile video.

The numbers suggest that carriers are doing a bad job of marketing the platform. While I am the first one to argue that on any given day, in just about every way, the network operators do a terrible job of promoting mobile media generally, I think it is unfair to blame them for the slow pick-up of mobile video. The most telling number in the survey is the usage rate among those who have tried mobile video. Only 27% of people who use mobile video at all access the feature one to three times a month, while 43% say they tried it once. In other words, the medium itself has trouble convincing people to tune in again.

An even more chilling statistic sits deeper in the QuickPlay survey: only 8% of people cited “features” and “services” as important criteria when they shopped for a carrier. When it came to switching carriers, only 3% cited features as a chief reason. Cost and coverage remain king. Content is at best a knave.

This will change. Personally, I do believe that eventually we will see a substantial piece of our interactive media consumption move to phones. But the numbers suggest that we shouldn't be deceived by the accelerated uptick in mobile media adoption in the past six months among the usual early-adopting suspects. More to the point, we shouldn't mistake occasional use of mobile media as habitual, engrained use.

We would like to think that interactive technology was a sudden “revolution” in the US, that its advantages were self-evident. They were not. Back in 1948, when TV had single-digit penetration in the US, all Americans had to do was turn one on “to get it.” Within seven years, the medium was ubiquitous. In TV shops on Main Street, in friends' houses, the technology showed and told what it did, and sold itself. That did not happen in the early '80s when IBM introduced the PC. That did not happen in 1994, when the Web became more generally available. Both marketers and consumers fished around for reasons to embrace gee-whiz technologies that didn't have an easy, natural place in our everyday rituals. The technologies evolved, as did our habits, in a kind of slow, decades-long dance that only now enjoys ubiquity.

A range of new phones emerged from CTIA this month that look and feel suspiciously like the Apple iPhone. And yet, we still haven't seen any carrier or OEM learn much from the other part of the Apple rollout: the brilliant commercials. The simple show-and-tell format of these spots is clean, uncluttered, and wholly persuasive. They show how a phone can connect pieces of your life and bring you the information you need. They tell us why we shouldn't be disinterested.

And it is not coincidental that the iPhone ads look a lot like turning on a TV for the first time.

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