

Did Apple blow it, big time?

Apple screwed up badly with their latest phone introduction. And let's be completely-clear about exactly what they screwed up. It wasn't the phone. The iPhone4S is a darned fine phone, with substantial upgrades over those that came before. Apple got the phone right. So what went wrong?

Mismanaged expectations. Apple's cult of secrecy requires, no, demands that, no matter how wild the rumors, the actual product blows people away. That didn't happen this time; we were led to believe that an iPhone5 would be released, a phone so vastly improved and revolutionary that polls said some ridiculous percentage of cellphone users would upgrade to it. In fact, the rumors became increasingly outlandish as we got closer to launch, the opposite of what would normally happen (the final straw being a deal with Sprint that would have them being the sole carrier of the imaginary iPhone5 for an indeterminate amount of time).

Apple normally relishes free publicity and has brazenly used it to its advantage. But couldn't they have tried to keep a lid on the more absurd stuff? Couldn't Apple have "leaked" out some accurate information here & there, or admitted that a particular rumor was indeed accurate (but of course vowed to discover the source of the rumor and make them face the extreme wrath of a corporation scorned)?

What was the thinking inside Apple as the rumor mill created expectations of grotesque proportions? Did Apple really think it could benefit from such exaggerations? Or was the truth (regarding the final product) known to so few Apple employees that, in fact, their own people were caught off-guard in the end?

The real irony is that the new phone is pretty darned cool and in nearly every way worthy of being called an iPhone5. It's faster, apparently has better reception (new antenna management), longer battery life and huge improvements to the camera, such that some will, in fact, see the new iPhone as being capable of replacing inexpensive point & shoots. And the new Siri voice-control app is very cool.

So why not just call it an iPhone5? How much disappointment over the product comes simply from keeping the same name as its predecessor? The only reason I can see for calling it a variant of the current product is that it looks like the current product. In fact, you wonder what Apple was thinking, putting new & better guts into the same case as the older unit. The phone is different-enough, internally, but doesn't look different-enough for people to see that hey, you've got the new phone! Or for users to rationalize that it's cool for others to see that they've got the cool new phone. Can you imagine a company like Coach (that sells higher-end women's handbags) coming out with an "improved" version of a purse that, externally, looked exactly like one people had before? It could have better internal dividers, it could weigh less, it could even be more-comfortable to carry, but it wouldn't look new.

It makes me wonder if, in fact, the original plan was for a cheaper version of the iPhone4 which would actually benefit from association with its fancier, pricier, earlier namesake. And in addition, an iPhone5 that might have had the exact same features as the 4s announced today, but in an updated case. Something went seriously wrong though; maybe Apple's concept of a fancy new case couldn't be built in time, yet the company was under pressure to get something out quickly (resulting in iPhone5 guts put into an iPhone4 case).

The iPhone4s has the makings of a great phone and is a significant improvement over what came before. How Apple managed to screw things up might become the next New Coke/Classic Coke debacle, something studied in marketing classes for years to come. Except for one thing. Apple is in a far more precarious position with their faithful, because many will assume this is proof that Steve Jobs can't be replaced, and knowing that he isn't coming back, the company's next steps aren't likely to be taken as seriously as before. To prove Apple could prosper in the post-Jobs era, they had to hit this one out of the park. They had the makings of at least an in-the-park home run with the product itself. But the marketing and packaging showed Apple hitting into a double play.

Thankfully there were no outs when Apple came to the plate, but as far as worldwide unstoppable consumer dominance is

concerned, it feels like it's the bottom of the 9th and Apple's down to their last out. The "Apple can do no wrong" feeling among its fanbase is gone.