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Short History of the Smartphone

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Back when I was a young child, I kept a dime in my pocket just in case. Of course, I hoped I never had to use it, but I was prepared. That dime was meant for an occasion where I needed to phone someone for help…in an emergency.

I had been taught how to use the phone, turn the dial, and place a dime into the slot in a payphone. Back then, phone booths were all over the place. Fast forward several decades, and you’d be hard-pressed to find a real-life phone booth.

Public phones are still available in airports, some shopping malls, and sports arenas. But, for the most part, phone booths belong to an earlier era. They’ve been replaced by the smartphone–iPhones and Android models making up the bulk of smartphones in America.

The Oxford Dictionary describes a smartphone as “a mobile phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, typically having a touchscreen interface, Internet access, and an operating system capable of running “downloaded apps.”

While Apple and Samsung are responsible for getting modern smartphones into the hands of most Americans, IBM also played a major role in the development of the smartphone.

ThoughtCo.com reports, “IBM had conceived of the idea for a computer-style phone as early as the 1970s, but it wasn’t until 1992 that the company unveiled a prototype at the COMDEX computer and technology trade show in Las Vegas. Besides placing and receiving calls, the Simon prototype could also send facsimiles, emails, and cellular pages. It even had a nifty touchscreen for dialing numbers. Extra features included apps for a calendar, address book, calculator, scheduler, and notepad. IBM also demonstrated that the phone was capable of displaying maps, stocks, news, and other third-party applications, with certain modifications.”

Sadly, IBM’s Simon was not going to be a major success. As ThoughtCo.com writes, “Tragically, the Simon ended up in the heap pile of being too ahead of its time.”

One of the major reasons for Simon’s failure? Price. It cost $1,100 in the 1990s. As a result, far too few fans bought it.ThoughtCo.com reports that Simon’s distributor, BellSouth Cellular, would eventually cut the price to $599 with a two–year contract. Even after that, only around 50,000 were sold.

After IBM’s Simon came noteworthy products, including the popular Palm Pilot made by the California–based Palm Inc. and Apple’s Newton, and don’t forget Handspring, a personal digital assistant (PDA) made by the folks who founded Palm. They founded Handspring after becoming unhappy with the direction of Palm Inc. after 3Com took over the company.

Meanwhile, Nokia’s 9000 Communicator and Ericsson’s R380 also made major advances toward the smartphones we use today.

And who could forget the leap forward made by Canada’s RIM (Research In Motion) with its BlackBerry brand of smartphones? Wikipedia writes, “BlackBerry was one of the most prominent smartphone brands globally, specializing in secure communications and mobile productivity, and well known for keyboards on most of its devices. At its peak in September 2013, there were 85-million BlackBerry subscribers worldwide. After that, however, BlackBerry lost its dominant position in the market due to the success of the Android and iOS platforms; its numbers had fallen to 23-million in March 2016.”

But it was in 2007 when Apple’s Steve Jobs took to the stage to introduce a revolutionary new product called the iPhone “that set an entirely new paradigm for computer-based phones,” writes ThoughtCo.com. It adds, “The look, interface, and core functionality of nearly every smartphone to come along since is, in some form or another, derived from the original iPhone’s innovative touchscreen-centric design.”

The same year Apple introduced its iPhone, Android Authority reports, “Google was still working on Android in secret, but in November of that year, the company slowly started to reveal its plans to compete with Apple and other mobile platforms.” In October of 2008, the first Android phone went on sale in the U.S. It was dubbed the “T–Mobile G1” (also called the HTC Dream outside the U.S.)

As iOS has improved and added features over time, so did Android. Its first codename was Cupcake in 2009. Later versions of the Android operating system were Donut, Eclair, Froyo, Gingerbread, Honeycomb, Ice Cream Sandwich, Jelly Bean, KitKat, Lollipop, Marshmallow, Nougat, Oreo, Pie, and Android Q, officially known as Android 10. Versions 11 and 12 followed.

I no longer carry a dime in my pocket. Instead, it’s been replaced by an iPhone SE – Apple’s least expensive smartphone.

Yet, I still marvel at how far technology has advanced since that ten-cent piece was my security blanket resting in my pocket. Today’s youngsters no longer carry dimes. Those coins are replaced by shiny Galaxy smartphones and iPhone 11, 12, and SEs in their pockets. We’ve come to a remarkable distance in the development of smartphones since the era when phone booths stood on street corners in most American towns and cities, and operators stood at the ready to assist.

