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White paper

The Nokia 3310: retro-cool and the art of localisation

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In May, Nokia relaunched its legendary 3310 mobile phone – a 2017 take on the iconic model which first came out at the turn of the millennium. Back then, mobile users were dreaming of colour displays or even Internet access – how many of us imagined how quickly our phones would turn into the multimedia lifestyle accessories packing an app for almost every conceivable situation? And, with their exponentially superior functionality, the question then arises: why does Nokia believe there is a market for its back-to-basics text-and-call model?

There's no denying that the original 3310 is a design classic with its minimalist lines and compact frame. When everybody has the latest iPhone or Samsung Galaxy, in certain circles pulling out the Nokia 3310 is likely to draw cries of admiration for its retro chic and understated elegance – “Look, they used to have real buttons!” the 20-somethings cry excitedly.

But we think there is something more interesting at work here than a simple technological nostalgia. After all, Sony isn't threatening to bring back the narrow-screen television so that hipsters can congratulate each other on their ironically old-fashioned viewing preferences.

It's perhaps more a question of realigning priorities. With the Internet at our fingertips and an endless variety of apps demanding our attention, our smartphones offer both huge possibilities and an infinite world of distraction.

Since the dawn of the industrial age, humans have harkened back to simpler and less complicated times. With this in mind, the relaunch of the Nokia 3310 asks us some important questions about our lifestyle choices today. What would it be like to get lost in a book on the bus instead of playing Candy Crush Saga? What would happen if we called our friends instead of Facebooking them? And does it really matter if your morning jog hasn't been logged on RunKeeper? In our “always online” world, it seems easy to forget that reading, talking and exercise are all activities that don't require some kind of digital validation in order to be worthwhile.

It's also worth thinking about this concept in terms of how we approach localisation. From machine translation to translation management systems, technology is an indispensable part of the service offering. It offers huge benefits in terms of speed, consistency and accuracy which, as with today's smartphone capabilities, would have been almost inconceivable 20 years ago.

Nevertheless, if we stripped away the technology, what would be left? We think the principles of in-market knowledge, linguistic creativity and brand awareness are the foundations of any localisation service upon which everything else is built. Just as you wouldn't buy a smartphone that couldn't make calls (you'd get a tablet instead), all the technological bells and whistles in the world can't replace a fundamental understanding of localisation principles and best practice.

In any field, this appreciation of core functionality is something worth identifying and nurturing – and it's perhaps why the Nokia 3310 is undergoing a mini-renaissance. Of course, not many of us are likely to give up our smartphones just yet. But it is perhaps a timely reminder that what we communicate – the words, the nuances, the linguistic subtleties – is still more important than the method in which we choose to do so. And, it should be added, the battery life for the 3310 is awesome too.

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