

Japan is known as a wellspring of life-changing technology, but what's it really like living in a society that constantly clamours for newer, smaller, faster gizmos? We find out in the first of a series of letters from our new Japanese correspondent J Mark Lytle

**K**onichiwa! You lucky people in the UK have it easy – you only have to contend with the difficulties of handling your pounds, shillings and pence via a computer terminal. Spare a thought for us poor residents of Japan as we're forced to do our banking in new and fiendishly inconvenient ways.

## Smart money

Hard on the heels of wildly unpopular home banking services, we now have mobile banking – juggling your finances on a postage-stamp-sized mobile phone screen. And what a joy it is. If you time it right you can complete a tricky fund-shuffling manoeuvre during the morning sardine session on the 8:35 to Shibuya. You Brits needn't lose too much sleep over the prospect of WAP-ing your cash around just yet, but be warned.

## Tin-pot telephones

It may seem a trifle ungrateful to launch straight into a rant against so-called 'customer service', but it serves to temper the often-inaccurate perception in the UK that everything electronic is splendid in the Far East. Take iMode: a certain well-known computer magazine editor recently collared me, asking why the Japanese mobile service was so fantastic. The answer is, it isn't that great – 90 percent of the calls I make on my colour-screen, featherweight keitai (mobile phone) may as well be to a deep-sea diver. Call quality is appalling, due to a less robust standard than that set for GSM. Still, there must be something that appeals to the 28 million NTT DoCoMo subscribers.

## It's no secret

In fact, DoCoMo and its competitors have little to hide – packet-switched data and efficient microbilling systems being the reasons for their popularity. In other words, rather than paying for time spent online, you only pay for what you download. Equally important, payment is handled by a line marked 'Packets of data' on next month's phone bill. The handset, which is effectively a POP3 email client, is also a big winner – think SMS on steroids.

## Sites for sore fingers

Putting aside voice-quality concerns, this efficiency is what Western users have to look forward to when 3G (third-generation) services make it to market. Forget about high-speed video streaming – the way ahead for European operators lies in making people comfortable with surfing a few sites while they're on the bus without worrying about high online charges.



←↑ Japanese mobile may be stylish, small and sexy but call quality is awful. However, this doesn't seem to diminish their popularity



↑ Konichiwa: say hello to Sony's new, improved and more budget Aibo. Ah, isn't he cute

Whether it's through iMode's CDMA (code division multiple access) standard or GPRS (general packet radio services), make no mistake, you too will be enjoying the 'benefits' of online services in your pocket before long.

## Slow on the up-take

As the world and his dog knows, DoCoMo has already launched the world's first 3G service in the Tokyo area. Initial sales of the FOMA handsets are, however, disappointing. A mere 5,700 brave, early adopters signed up in the first three days of sales – peanuts in the Japanese telecoms world. It's unfair to talk of numbers until 3G moves beyond what is effectively a public beta and DoCoMo builds the service out to other cities.

## New best friend

On the product front, Japan has been awash with innovation this year, and I've recently adopted one of the two new Sony Aibo devices. My obedient little Macaron (blame Sony for the name, not me) may be a little less complex than his forerunners but, retailing at around £550, he's a lot cheaper and easier on the eye. Hats off to Sony for making the best toy of the last few years a lot more affordable. Sayonara. ■