

The Sydney Morning Herald

SE The Guide - Livewire
HD **OnePlus budget debut**
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WC 791 words
PD 6 October 2014
SN The Sydney Morning Herald
SC SMHH
ED First
PG 8
LA English
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THE EXPERT VIEW - SOCIAL NOTES

Being part of the "it" crowd used to mean fagging behind the school bins, hanging out in hidden cafes down dingy alleyways, and landing enough party invites to fill your diary.

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Social media has moved the popularity stakes into virtual ground - networks such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest where the influencers lead, and followers hang off their every post - have become powerful points of reference for trend setting.

Chinese smartphone **company** OnePlus, a subsidiary of Oppo, has realised the power of social media for seed marketing, and has chosen to sell its flagship phone by "invite only" outside **China**.

Carl Pei, director of OnePlus Global, says the invitation system was less about creating buzz and more about managing inventory. "Ordering too much up front would have killed us," he says. "We needed to manage the number of devices reaching consumers so our logistics and support teams would have a chance to catch up."

The phone in question, which the **company** is calling the "2014 flagship killer", has top-end specs that can compete with leaders such as Samsung's Galaxy S5, Sony Xperia's Z2 and HTC's One M8.

The brain is a Qualcomm Snapdragon 801 processor with global 4G LTE; the screen is a 13.9-centimetre, 1080p display; the camera is a 13-megapixel Sony Exmor with f/2.0 aperture; and the operating system is the highly regarded CyanogenMod based on Android 4.4. In all, a competitive list of features.

The game changer is the \$300 price point; the **company** forgoing profits for the first two years to deliver a benchmark phone at a third of the cost of its competitors.

Problem is, you have to know someone to get one, or be lucky enough to win one through a social media contest.

Clever techies didn't let random selection stop them. A wiki on tech **site** Whirlpool was set up to explain how the system works, telling Australian customers how to register for an invitation, and allowing Whirlpool members to refer one another.

Pei says OnePlus targeted early adopters, banking on them to spread the word. "Early adopters are far more likely to take a chance on an unknown **company** selling their phones solely online. These people tend to be quite active in online forums and social media and were crucial in helping us grow."

Where the invitation scheme took a wrong turn was with a "Ladies First" promotion that called on females to draw the OnePlus logo on their bodies and take a selfie, with the 50 most "liked" women given the option to **buy** the phone. Within hours, women had slammed the queue-jumping contest, labelling it insulting, degrading and sleazy, with one woman posting a photo of herself flipping the bird to the **company**.

The promo was canned on the day it launched and OnePlus apologised, admitting the contest was misguided and perpetuated an offensive stereotype.

Pei says selling the phone at cost, with no real marketing budget, has forced the **company** to market creatively but admits the body selfie campaign was a mistake.

In September, via its forum, OnePlus announced plans to allow pre-orders for the One phone, which Pei confirms should be in place by the end of October. The invitation system will continue but, as with Google's Nexus series of phones, One won't be available through telcos, **sold** online only.

As the bold **Chinese** disruptor moves into India and Australia, Pei says availability may open up, especially as it has lost customers who wouldn't wait. "Selling directly online may not be the best solution for every market. As we grow and expand, we'll explore potential partnerships."

But in the lead up to Christmas sales, the elusive OnePlus One device has some stiff competition seven months after its debut, with consumers now weighing up the iPhone 6, Moto X, Nexus X and Galaxy Note 4 among the new offerings.

Another problem is concern about One's lithium polymer battery, which exploded in one owner's pocket while he was on the subway in France, burning a hole through his jeans. OnePlus responded quickly, dispatching staff to the victim, and reimbursing him for all costs. "We did have one unfortunate incident of a user's battery smoking," Pei says. "To the best of our knowledge, it was an isolated incident."

It's not the only phone to spontaneously combust - some Samsung and Apple phones have also met fiery ends.

Whether one lemon will be enough to extinguish desire for **China's** underdog remains to be seen. Clearly, the phone is hot **property**, but nobody wants a literal interpretation.

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