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iPhone answers the call to be hip

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Say this for the folks at Apple. They know how to generate excitement.

When the doors to the Apple retail store at Arden Fair mall opened at 6 p.m. Friday to welcome the first iPhone customers, black-clad employees formed lines as they clapped, whooped and high-fived the new arrivals.

Stacked behind the counter in stylish black bags were scores of the \$500 and \$600 devices - sleek, sexy units that combine the functions of a cell phone, music and video player, Internet browser and e-mail device.

Judging by the line of nearly 200, mainly twenty- and thirtysomethings, Apple appears to have gained the trust and tapped the wallets of a crucial generation of consumers: youths with an insatiable appetite to have the newest, latest and greatest.

"This puts the Mac lifestyle in my pocket," said David Flatter, a 25-year-old Sacramento graphic designer, after exiting the store toting a \$600 iPhone.

"Apple makes good products. We trust Apple, and they've never failed us. ... I would have paid \$1,000 for one."

If Apple lives up to its lofty reputation of simplifying design and technology, American consumerism and Apple's magic marketing dust will propel this juggernaut forward as other people try to keep up with the Joneses, experts predict.

"The economy now rests on people buying commodities," said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the State University at Buffalo in New York. "And that has really created a society in which people increasingly feel the need to keep up with the latest thing -- and more and more, the newest thing lasts a shorter time."

The draw for early iPhone buyers isn't so much the device's capabilities, but what it says about its users, noted one technology industry veteran.

"It's a status symbol. It showcases exclusivity," said analyst Rob Enderle of the Enderle Group in San Jose. "The iPhone is only going to go to a few folks, and folks are chasing that exclusivity."

Apple Chief Executive Steve Jobs is a master at selling that message, Enderle said.

"With Apple, you're trendy, you are in the know and you are on the cutting edge," he said. "In a world where individuals are increasingly less relevant, the perception is this makes you relevant, you are instantly almost somebody."

But that didn't seem to be the motivation for Chuck Trebino, a 62-year-old airline pilot from Valley Springs near Stockton. "I just have more money than brains," he said, then laughed about his willingness to buy a \$600 cell phone.

And Barbara Abbott didn't seem that moved by status. Also 62, Abbott is nearing retirement from her state job, and wants to treat herself. "It's a toy," she said. "But I'm at that point in my life where I can have toys again."

Still, the iPhone is different from the Tickle Me Elmo your child wants for Christmas because the hand-held machine allows you to e-mail and Web-surf more often and from everywhere and can be the impetus for lifestyle changes.

Dozens of other phones combine many of these functions, but none has spurred mass adoption of features like text messaging and Web browsing.

About four in 10 people send text messages today, and one in 10 browse the Web on their cell phones, said Mark Donovan, senior analyst for M:Metrics, a mobile market measurement firm.

"There's a general hunger for a device that connects you to your digital life," Donovan said. "The mobile phone becomes the logical touch point for that connection to the digital lifestyle."

Most who now e-mail remotely are business users who have BlackBerrys that connect through servers to their offices, said Daniel Longfield, an industry analyst for Frost & Sullivan, a Palo Alto-based market research and growth consulting firm. The iPhone is going to bring that capability to the masses, he predicted.

The Sacramento region has the potential to sign up a significant number of users because AT&T, the exclusive iPhone carrier, has about 30 percent of the market.

Cliff Lee is no stranger to lining up for new gadgets, having spent one night in front of a store late last year waiting to snag a Microsoft Xbox 360 game console.

He arrived at Arden Fair at 9 p.m. Thursday, managing to snag the second place in line. "It's just something you gotta have," said the 21-year-old UC Davis student, explaining his willingness to spend 21 hours at the mall waiting to get the phone.

"It's fun to show it off ... and this is kind of an adventure," he said.

Luckily for the industry, said Dennis Tootelian, professor of marketing at California State University, Sacramento, the iPhone captures a youth market "which has all kinds of money they're going to spend on this kind of stuff."

At an AT&T store at nearby Market Square, 18-year-old Gianni Alasua had been waiting since 9 a.m. for his chance at the phone.

"It's an iPod and a phone! The screen's gorgeous," Alasua said, flashing a bright smile. "This came around at the right time. Apple never fails."

Soon, the clock struck 6, the doors opened, and after some cursory browsing -- he knew what he was looking for, after all -- Alsasua exited the store, his iPhone tucked away, and headed to the parking lot.

"I can't wait to open it, get it activated, put my songs on it," Alsasua said outside his car, smiling like it was his birthday. "I'm gonna upload that. It should only take a couple of minutes."

Then he hopped in the car for the drive home to do just that.

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