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Last Updated: Friday, 21 November, 2003, 11:11 GMT

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UK debut for 'blind' mobile

By Geoff Adams-Spink

BBC News Online disability affairs reporter

The first mobile phone designed specifically for blind and partially sighted people has gone on show in the UK.

The phone is made by a Spanish company, Owasys - pronounced oasis - who hope to have their 22C handset on the UK market in three months' time.

It goes on sale in Spain next week.

The phone is on display at the Royal National Institute of the Blind's Techshare exhibition in Birmingham.

It has no visual display at all but uses a speech synthesiser to read everything that would normally appear on the screen.

As well as giving audio feedback from button presses, the 22C can send and receive text messages and will speak the name or number of incoming callers.

Customer feedback

Owasys hope the mobile will retail at around £250.

The company - formed by ex-employees of Ericsson - consulted blind and partially sighted users throughout the development phase.

They say the finished product reflects the customer feedback they received.

Fernando Aguirre, Marketing and Sales Director for Owasys, told BBC News Online that the company is hoping to sell around 20,000 of the mobiles in Spain and twice that number in the UK.

"We thought there were parts of the consumer market whose demands were not very well covered by the big players," he said.



The phone has no visual display

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Fernando Aguirre of Owasys

"There was a need among blind people for a product like this"

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“ A number of people just want a simple device that's easy to use and friendly ”

Steve Tyler, RNIB technology specialist

"From our conversations with ONCE (the blind people's organisation in Spain) and the RNIB here in the UK, it was clear that there was a need among blind people for a product like this."

RNIB technology specialist, Steve Tyler, said the phone has an appeal beyond blind and partially sighted people.

He said it will appeal to anyone who wants to make and receive calls but who is put off by screen-based technology.

"A number of people just want a simple device that's easy to use and friendly," he said.

"What mobile phone should you buy for your elderly grandmother for example, who isn't interested in flashing lights, screens and menu systems, but she is used to an ordinary-looking phone?"

Owasys say the 22C is the first of a number of devices aimed at niche markets, but declined to give further details.

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