

iPhone mini

Call it mini or nano, it amounts to the same thing: a cheaper iPhone. To make sense of either name, this much-rumoured product would also have to be smaller – which would be odd, since buyers of the full-size iPhone are told it's worth all that money because it's so slim and compact. But who's counting?

Investment analysts are. They're not so much speculating that it's happening as advising that it should be. Apple is beginning to lose ground to Android in smartphone market share, and as much as the company has always been about making great products for the discerning few rather than OK products for the uncaring masses, it would still be crazy to let its mobile dominance slip away for want of a cut-price model for people who don't have £500+ to spend on a phone. Because people who don't have £500+ to spend on a phone is a *huge* demographic.

With the iPhone 4 and 4S, preserved in Apple's current line-up as lower-cost alternatives to the iPhone 5, reportedly selling extremely well – some estimates even put them close to the iPhone 5's numbers – there seems to be a gap in the market for a more affordable Apple phone. And in a market that already parses 'more affordable Apple phone' as 'Samsung phone', Apple would surely be wise to fill that gap rather than let someone else do it, mentioning no names.

Tim Cook has hinted that he gets the point, telling Bernstein analyst Tony Sacconaghi two years ago – yes, that's

how long these rumours have been around – that Apple products shouldn't be 'just for the rich'.

What could Tim take out of an iPhone to make it cheaper? Up to a point, simply rolling back to the spec of a one- or two- or three-year-old model will do it. But Apple hates making its software compatible with any product on which the paint is fully dry, so it's hard to see it going back very far; and it needs a better sales pitch than 'You know, the old one.'

THE IPAD MINI is essentially an iPad 2 crammed into a slimmer and lighter case, with the compromise of a smaller screen of a lower quality than current models. If something similar could be done with the iPhone, and shave more than a negligible amount off the price while maintaining a good margin (and in the US, a fat subsidy from the network carriers who sell it, locked, to consumers who are now prohibited by law from switching provider), it could be an attractive proposition.

Just as long as it isn't too attractive. The danger of offering a cheaper option is that buyers take it, leaving the full-price product on the shelf. Enough needs to be

wrong with the cheap iPhone to put off anyone who could stretch their budget to the expensive one if they chose to. As with the iPad mini, a non-Retina screen would be a good start, reducing bulk, weight and battery usage as well as cost while leaving the iPhone proper looking crisper. But Apple already knows the difference is lost on many users.

That means more will have to go. The extra row of icons from the iPhone 5's tall screen is one candidate. Before its launch, Tim Cook used to boast that Android developers had to cater for multiple screen sizes and shapes, while there was 'only one iPhone'. This argument began to look suspect once there were two. Still, continuing to sell an iPhone 4-shaped iPhone would be no worse than continuing to sell the iPhone 4.

But if there are going to be two iPhones, why not make one of them a different size altogether? Maybe it could be truly mini, with just three icons across and five down, or all the way nano, with two across, four down and a lanyard for your keyring. Almost anything is possible.

Thus far, there've been no purported supply chain leaks of smaller iPhone casings, which may or may not mean no such thing is close to production. So there's not much to go on. Prototypes revealed in the recent Apple/Samsung court cases show that a number of completely different iPhone designs have been considered, some of which might still be on the drawing board; but all of them have the same screen format. Something else they seem to have in common is a metal



➤ **Silent type**
 TJ Kohli's ultra-minimalist edge-to-edge glazed iPhone concept doesn't give much away. But it could be full of stars

case, a feature of every current iOS product. One thing, then, we can be pretty sure of is that an iPhone mini would be made of aluminium. Naturally, one of the most popular rumours is that it'll be plastic.

It's been claimed that this suggestion is supported by a recent Apple patent filing describing a plastic phone. But the patent (freepatentsonline.com/8364032.pdf) only concerns a method of preventing the flash from a built-in camera bouncing back into a device through a plastic panel. Since the camera in the iPhone 5 is mounted in a plastic panel, we can probably all stop shouting 'They're going to make a plastic iPhone!' now.

Still, anyone who remembers the warm, curvy 3GS would welcome a plastic iPhone mini. One like the concept below left, for example, created by Item, a product design studio based in London and Paris (designedbyitem.com). Inspired by Pantone colour chips, the two-tone case looks lovely to hold. And if you don't fancy plastic, this could be the same matted aluminium as on the iPod touch.

But would this feel like going backwards for Apple? The only way forwards, surely, is towards an ever more austere minimalism. That's the direction taken by TJ Kohli, a user interface designer from Atlanta, Georgia, with the concept on the right - originally proposed for the next major iPhone release, but surely well suited to a stripped-down model. This mini-monolith could ditch almost all the features of a modern iPhone and still exert an inscrutably mesmerising attraction over the budget smartphone buyer. ▣



➔ **Not this one**
 There's many a slip 'twixt drawing board and Apple Store. Here are several



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