



India's \$200 "Simputer" Set for November Roll-Out

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By Anshuman Daga,
Reuters

The "Simputer," a \$200 hand-held Indian computer aimed at taking the Internet to rural areas, will hit the market in November, the firm spearheading the manufacture of the device designed by a non-profit trust said.

The Simputer, short for Simple, Inexpensive and Multilingual, is a brainchild of the Simputer Trust, one of whose key trustees is the chief executive officer of Encore Software Ltd.

The trust sells the design and licence to make the "Simputer" and Encore is expected to be the first to make and sell it.

"We are not projecting this as a general purpose PDA (personal digital assistant) but we will use this as a platform to deliver various IT initiatives," Mark Mathias, Encore's vice-president, told Reuters on Monday.

Designed for mass use, the Simputer uses Linux, the open-source software that is freely available on the Internet and elsewhere.

Mathias is one of the seven group members of the project.

"The hand-held market is just about exploding in India and we believe we are the early entrants with such a product," he said.

The Simputer Trust unveiled the device in April. Mathias said Encore planned to begin selling the product from November.

The Bangalore-based Encore expected to sell about 100,000 units of Simputer in the first year of operations with this increasing to between 250,000 to 350,000 in two years.

Encore's low-cost device, is part of a series of initiatives by a set of socially committed entrepreneurs and scientists to bridge the "digital divide" in India, which has a booming software industry alongside some 35 percent of citizens who cannot read or write.

Besides hooking up to the Internet, the Simputer, slightly larger than the popular PDA made by Palm Inc, has a text-to-speech software and other easy-to-use applications aimed at allowing India's vast rural population to gain from using technology.

"We are looking at a few areas like sales automation and specific applications in electronic governance," Mathias said.

India has a very low personal computer base of about five million in a nation of over one billion people, but several provincial governments are increasingly using technology to help the rural population.

For example, there is a plan to use the Internet to make farmers aware of the prices their produce can fetch.

Encore's CEO Vinay Deshpande is also the president of India's Manufacturers Association of Information Technology.

The firm says it has received enquiries from companies in Latin America, Europe and some Asian countries for supplies.

The Simputer, powered by an Intel chip offers a 32 megabit memory and can be shared by users through a "smart card" reader which stores personal information.

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