Red’s Hydrogen One smartphone won’t actually get those camera modules



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- The Red phone. It’s scary looking.
- It had an aggressive industrial design and giant bezels.
- This is the removed image from Red’s site. You would have the base phone, snap on a whole second body, then attach a lens to that.
- This description is also gone.

Late last year, professional movie camera company Red dove into the smartphone market with the extremely industrial-looking Red Hydrogen One. It was big, ugly, and built with

carbon fiber and aluminum, just like Red's ~$20,000 movie cameras. But other than a 3D display and the aggressive design, the $1,300 Hydrogen One was built from mostly standard smartphone parts. The main sales pitch for the device was Red's modular accessory system, which someday promised to bring a real Red-developed camera sensor to the Red smartphone. It now sounds like the modular system is dead. Red has scrubbed the mention of the modules from its website and announced "radical changes" to its smartphone program that seemingly include a new device with a Red sensor built in.

Anyone familiar with the company would naturally expect a Red smartphone to come with a great camera. Instead, Red used off-the-shelf smartphone parts and turned in a device with standard camera performance. The modular accessory system was due out in 2019, and it was supposed to work via a set of copper contacts on the back. Besides a promised power pack and expandable storage modules, this was supposed to be the way to finally put Red's camera magic into its smartphone. The "cinema grade camera module" would have doubled or tripled the thickness of the phone, but it would have come with a Red sensor and a removable lens system.

The camera module photo and any other mention of modules was quietly removed from Red's website almost a month ago (you can compare this archive to the live site). After Red forum members started to notice, Red founder Jim Jannard made a vague and incoherent statement addressing the move. Jannard admitted that the Hydrogen smartphone project ran into "a series of obstacles," and he said that "changes" were coming to the program. At no point did Jannard say that the modular system would continue to be developed, and with the removal of the photos, we're going to call the modular system dead.

A new smartphone with a built-in

Red sensor?

Going forward, Jannard indicated that Red is working on a "new" smartphone imaging solution that would be "in-device." Since the existing Hydrogen One already has an "in-device" camera that isn't removable and isn't from Red, we can only conclude that this means a new, second smartphone is on the way. Further comments from Jannard referencing a "Pro camera version" of a Hydrogen phone (where "pro camera" presumably means a Red-developed sensor) would seem to support this.

If Red really still wants to be in the smartphone business, a new device would certainly make the most sense. Using an off-the-shelf sensor from some other company only ever seemed like a stop-gap solution in the first place—one that allowed Red to bring a smartphone to market while buying it time to develop a smartphone-compatible Red sensor later. Modular systems add expense and complexity, and it's hard to imagine someone wanting a Red phone without Red's trademark camera technology, so why make it an option? It's also hard to imagine someone investing additional money in the Hydrogen One at this point, as it uses a Snapdragon 835 SoC, which will soon be two years old. A new phone could have a newer SoC and better specs, and that extra horsepower would be very useful if users actually start pushing around 4K content.

It sounds like this change at Red has also led to changes in the smartphone project's management. For now, we can only wait to see if Red actually releases another smartphone product or if this is just an intermediate step to shutting down its smartphone project entirely.

Listing image by Red

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