

Palm Pre: a smartphone not quite smart enough

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Palm's new offering has some nice features, including a replaceable battery and full keyboard. But it's way behind the iPhone on software.

If the Palm (PALM) Pre had appeared a year ago, it might have turned the smartphone market upside down. It would have beaten out Apple's (AAPL) iPhone 3G and the iTunes App Store, Google's (GOOG) Android, the BlackBerry (RIMM) Bold and Storm as well as BlackBerry App World, and possibly taken the spoils. But the field has grown so crowded with clever entries in the past 12 months that the Pre, ingenious as it is, seems evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Comparisons with the iPhone are inevitable, and in some ways I'm more impressed with the Pre, which costs \$200 after a mail-in rebate with a two-year Sprint (S) plan.

The multitouch display supports a richer range of flicks and swipes of the finger than does the iPhone screen. The battery should get you through a day of hard use, and you can pop in a spare if you run short on power—something the iPhone design doesn't allow. In addition, the screen module slides to reveal a full qwerty keyboard.

Thanks to the iPhone, however, smartphones have evolved into versatile handheld computers. And as the competition among them intensifies, hardware features such as those on the Pre are just table stakes. The real game is software. For the Pre to succeed, Palm will have to inspire an army of third-party developers to write the sort of clever applications that define the iPhone.

Backward on social networking

When the Pre launches on June 6, it will still have a long way to go. Palm and its exclusive carrier, Sprint, have not yet set up a payment system, so only free programs are available. The pages of the App Catalog, Palm's online store, are sparsely furnished and nearly devoid of games. Perhaps most surprising, there are no programs providing fast access to Facebook and Twitter. You have to use the Web browser to reach those services—a giant step backward compared with the social networking experience on competing phones.

For the many fans of old Palm software, there is a program called Classic from MotionApps that lets you run programs written for devices from the original PalmPilot to Treos. It works well, but the version on the Pre is only a seven-day trial. After that, customers must arrange to buy it from MotionApps.

Palm's built-in software is a mixed bag. The WebOS operating system lets multiple programs run at once, something the iPhone doesn't permit. And unlike the Android-based T-Mobile (DT) G1, whose battery drains after a couple of hours if you leave Google Maps running in the background, Palm has figured out how to manage power for multiple apps. The Web browser, built on the same basic code used by the iPhone and Android, works well, although it leaves you wishing the screen, which is 3.1 inches to the iPhone's 3.5, were just a bit bigger.

If you start typing on the home screen or many other windows, the Pre will begin a search that looks first in contacts, then on the Web—an idea seemingly inspired by Android. But there is no way to search the calendar or e-mail, a gaping deficiency.

Tiny keyboard for e-mail

One distinctive feature of the Pre is its ability to create a unified contact list and calendar from multiple sources, including Microsoft (MSFT) Outlook, the old Palm Desktop, and Web services such as Gmail and Google Calendar.

When it comes to e-mail, I suspect many corporate users will rely on the Microsoft Exchange service, which works fine provided your company uses delivery software called Active-Sync Direct Push. Palm makes it easy for you to set up other e-mail accounts at the same time. But with such a tiny keyboard, it's tedious to enter anything but very short messages, and it's unnecessarily difficult to read some types of messages because you can't use the mail program in horizontal mode.

The Pre does well with both music and video. It's got a good music player, and when you are connected to Wi-Fi you can buy songs from Amazon.com's (AMZN) MP3 store (downloads over the Sprint network are not allowed). When connected to a Mac or PC, the Pre can also sync with your iTunes music library. But the device cannot download podcasts directly—you need to sync with iTunes, at which point the podcasts get mixed in with your songs. There's a built-in YouTube (GOOG) player that runs well, but like other smartphones, the Pre cannot handle the full-power Adobe Flash video used on sites such as Hulu.com.

It is easy to forget that when the iPhone launched, it also had software and hardware issues. The difference is that Apple was effectively pioneering a new market, so it had plenty of time to get the formula right. Palm, a struggling company going up against surprisingly strong competition, faces a vastly more difficult challenge. I am pulling for the Pre, but I wouldn't want to bet my iPhone on its success.

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