

How To Buy a Smart Phone

Seven things you need to know before you take the plunge.

by Mark Spoonauer

Regular cell phones are getting smarter by the second, but there are plenty of reasons to upgrade to a smart phone. For one, you'll have a fully functional PDA and a phone in a single device. You'll also be able to access your e-mail (along with attachments) and surf the whole Web. Another major benefit of smart phones is having an integrated keyboard, which makes pecking out messages and URLs a breeze. And because smart phones have sophisticated operating systems, you can expand their capabilities with your choice of thousands of available applications. The best part? Smart phones are much thinner and much less expensive than they were a couple of years ago, with many compelling models priced at less than \$200. So how do you pick the right device? Read on.



Palm OS smart phones are the easiest to use, Windows Mobile devices work best with Outlook and Exchange, and BlackBerrys offer the fastest e-mail delivery and overall performance.

1 NETWORK

Why it's important: The network you choose will determine not only how good your call quality and coverage are but also whether you'll be able to download that important message or look up that piece of information with the speed you need.

What to look for: Verizon Wireless is our top pick because of the carrier's excellent EV-DO data network and because of its reliable voice coverage and quality. Sprint also offers high-speed EV-DO data and at a much cheaper price; however, the carrier's voice quality isn't quite as good, and you'll find yourself roaming more often (for voice and data) as you venture outside major metro areas.

If you're a globetrotter, you should consider AT&T because you'll be able to use your smart phone abroad (if you pay extra); plus, the carrier's expanding high-speed HSDPA data network in the United States supports simultaneous voice and data sessions, which means you can surf the Web or download e-mail while you're on the phone. T-Mobile will also let you use your smart phone overseas, but it has the narrowest footprint of the big four carriers and doesn't yet support 3G. Still, its cheap data and voice plans and attractive selection of Wi-Fi-enabled devices make it a good choice for smart phone buyers on a budget.

2 DESIGN & KEYBOARD

Why it's important: Smart phone design is critical because you'll probably be using it more often than you would a regular cell phone. In fact, many smart phone owners are comfortable leaving their laptops behind.

What to look for: Start by testing out the keyboard. The keys should be large enough and the layout well-spaced enough to make thumb typing comfortable and error-free. The best keyboards are found on BlackBerry devices, with the Palm Treo line being a close second. Navigation is the other key design element. Touchscreens are nice to have, but they're generally giving way to D pads and trackballs. Regardless of which route you choose, navigating menus and opening and closing applications should require little effort. Some may prefer devices like the Samsung BlackJack and Motorola Q9h because they feature both D pads and scroll wheels.

3 OPERATING SYSTEM

Why it's important: A phone can be called "smart" if it possesses a robust operating system—one that powers all of the included applications and allows users to easily add new applications.

What to look for: BlackBerry is the OS of choice

for people who place a priority on fast performance, real-time e-mail delivery, and long battery life. Palm is the easiest OS to use and offers the widest range of available applications; despite some sluggishness, it's perfect for people who are looking for an organizer that doubles as a messaging and Web-surfing device. Windows Mobile is attractive because of its tight integration with Outlook and Exchange, as well as its familiar look and feel. Look for devices that run Windows Mobile 6, because it offers better performance than WM5.

4 E-MAIL & ATTACHMENTS

Why it's important: The ability to access your Inbox using a dedicated mobile e-mail application is one of the defining characteristics of smart phones. All smart phone operating systems support standard POP and IMAP accounts, and most of these devices can tie into corporate e-mail using such solutions as Microsoft Exchange, Good Mobile Messaging, and BlackBerry Connect. Unlike most regular phones, smart phones will let you quickly view Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and PDF files.

What to look for: BlackBerry is the messaging king, thanks to its speedy and secure push e-mail technology that works with both the company's BlackBerry Internet Service and BlackBerry Enterprise Servers. On the other hand, Windows Mobile is also a compelling option because of Outlook Mobile and new features in WM6 like the ability to search your Inbox. Palm OS-based Treos get the job done, but its VersaMail client is relatively clunky.

Treo and BlackBerry devices both handle attachments well, but we prefer Treos because they come preloaded with Documents To Go for editing documents. Windows Mobile 5 Smartphone Edition devices are especially weak in the attachment department because you're forced to zoom in to view attachments. So if you don't opt for a Treo, either get a WM6 smart phone, which includes Office Mobile, or download Documents To Go for Windows Mobile 5 (\$29.99).

5 WEB BROWSING

Why it's important: Smart phones run circles around regular phones when it comes to surfing the Web because they feature full-fledged HTML browsers. That means you can surf to nearly any site in relatively little time.

What to look for: Palm's Blazer browser, a longtime staple of Treos, continues to be our favorite because of how quickly it begins loading text; you can start reading articles or search results almost instantly. RIM's Java-based browser comes in a very close second; even over an EDGE connection you'll enjoy fast browsing speeds on BlackBerry devices. Internet Explorer Mobile has traditionally been the slowest smart phone browser, but it's improved with Windows Mobile 6.

Regardless of whether you're purchasing a WM5 or WM6 smart phone, however, we highly recommend that you buy a device that rides on a 3G data network or Wi-Fi, if not both.

6 MULTIMEDIA

Why it's important: If you like the idea of carrying around one device for work and play, a smart phone is a good gadget to get. Smart phones let you enjoy your favorite music, pictures, and videos on the go; plus, they're generally easier to transfer media files to because of their bundled USB cables and PC synchronization software.

What to look for: All Windows Mobile devices can play secure WMA audio files out of the box and sync with Windows Media Player 11, giving them a huge advantage over the competition. But BlackBerry is no slouch; the new Curve, for example, has a media player and comes with Roxio software for drag-and-drop file transfers. Palm-based Treo smart phones fall into a distant third in this category because they currently don't offer integrated media players or an easy way to sync media files with a PC. However, applications like Pocket Tunes (music) and Kinoma (video) help.

If multimedia is a top priority, look for a smart phone that ties in with your carriers' music and video services. For example, the Treo 755p from Sprint works with Sprint TV, and the Samsung BlackJack plays Cingular Video and XM Radio. If you want to hear music and video wirelessly, make sure your smart phone supports stereo Bluetooth.

7 DATA PLAN

Why it's important: Smart phone prices have plummeted, but the cost of using one has not. Expect to pay anywhere from \$15 to \$45 per month on top of your voice plan to get unlimited data, which allows you to access e-mail and surf the Web. Note that in most cases text messaging is not included.

What to look for: Sprint leads the field in this category by offering unlimited data starting at \$15 per month for Treo and Windows Mobile devices and \$39 per month for BlackBerrys. AT&T's unlimited data plans start as low as \$19.99 per month for very basic smart phones, but range from \$29.99 for BlackBerrys to \$39.99 for devices like the BlackJack.

T-Mobile charges \$29.99 per month for its Total Internet plan for Windows Mobile devices (this includes T-Mobile HotSpot access). It costs \$19.99 per month for T-Mobile's BlackBerry Unlimited plan, although you'll pay \$10 more for enterprise e-mail access. Verizon Wireless offers voice and data bundles starting at \$79.99 per month for 450 minutes, which works out to \$40 per month for data. ■