

Review: New Android phone better, far from perfect

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Shown is the the HTC myTouch from T-Mobile running Google's Android operating system in San Francisco, Monday, July 27, 2009. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

(AP) -- Less than a year after T-Mobile and HTC released the first smart phone using Google's Android operating system, the wireless operator and the handset maker are back with a sleeker device that takes advantage of recent software updates.

The myTouch 3G has plenty of hardware and software kinks - and a

\$200 price tag that's \$50 higher than the predecessor, the G1, both with a two-year contract. But advances to the operating system may draw a smattering of cheers.

The myTouch, which goes on sale Aug. 5, looks similar to the G1, but replaces the bulk of its predecessor's slide-out keyboard with a slimmer, lighter frame that sports a touch-screen keyboard like that of the iPhone. Its face is still dominated by a long screen, but it has a few more buttons below the screen, including one that offers a shortcut to Google's search engine.

Besides being lighter, the myTouch has better battery life than the G1. It's rated for up to seven hours of talk time, two more than the older phone, and it had no trouble lasting through a day of use that included talking, listening to music, surfing the Web and checking e-mail.

It is also zippier overall thanks to the Android 1.5 software, which T-Mobile began rolling out to G1 users as well in May.

Taking photos on the G1 using the first iteration of Android was often sluggish and painful, as you never knew when the shutter would finally click. It's faster on the myTouch, though still slower than it should be.

You can also take videos now, something I could do on the G1 before the software update with a less-than-impressive third-party application, and there's a quick link for budding auteurs to upload them to Google's video-sharing site YouTube.

One helpful new feature specific to the myTouch is the ability to check work e-mail through [Microsoft Exchange](#). This could make the handset more attractive to business users who want round-the-clock access to both their personal and work e-mail accounts on the same device.

I liked Google's voice search, accessible by holding down myTouch's search button or by swiping the touch screen to the left to reveal a virtual button. It worked impressively well when I commanded it to find sites on "bacon salt" and "best tacos in San Francisco." The only time it slipped up was when I tried something silly - "alligator french fries" - and it thought I was looking for eBay.

There are numerous issues with the software though, the biggest of which concerns the touch-screen keyboard, a new feature in Android 1.5 that made me wish the myTouch had a slim slide-out bottom keyboard like Palm's Pre.

When holding the phone upright, the myTouch keyboard felt too cramped, even for my somewhat-small digits. And when holding it sideways, I still frequently hit incorrect keys. It also seemed to take me much longer to tap out an instant message or e-mail than it does when I use a smart phone keyboard with real keys.

Like most handsets, the myTouch can suggest words and correct common typing errors, but these didn't speed me up. Rather, I sent out a few silly messages to friends without realizing it - apparently the myTouch was "correcting" some of my slang - then had to resend the words I'd meant to express.

I was also peeved to notice that while you can use applications with the phone held upright or sideways, the myTouch home screen never changes orientation. Close an application while holding the phone sideways, and you must to turn it in your hand - or tilt your head.

On the hardware side, one feature still absent and sorely missed is the standard headphone jack sported by the myTouch's main competitors. The phone is slim, but it's no slender supermodel, so it's hard to believe [HTC](#) couldn't have crammed in one.

There is a pretty good compromise, though. The phone comes with a headphone adapter that also works as a microphone, along with as a pair of earbuds (The G1 came with earbuds that fit its charging and audio port, but no adapter). With this, I could plug in my own oversized ear cans and listen to tunes while still answering calls.

If you're a fan of wireless listening and talking, the newer Android software does support Stereo Bluetooth, so you can also just use a Bluetooth headset.

Another accessory improvement: The myTouch comes with a 4 gigabyte microSD memory card, four times what was included with the G1. This gives you plenty of space for storing applications you download from the Android Market, which now has more than 6,300 free and paid applications and widgets, including Shazam for identifying songs and Twidgit Lite for monitoring short messages on Twitter.

MyTouch customers who feel overwhelmed by the options - and by the still-cluttered, confusing look of the Android Market - might be cheered by the bundle of applications called the AppPack that T-Mobile is rolling out along with the phone on Aug. 5.

If you were looking at buying an [iPhone](#), Pre or BlackBerry, you're not too likely to charge down to a [T-Mobile](#) store to purchase a myTouch instead. The competitors' operating systems are simply better developed at this point, and there are some features and ease-of-use issues the Android software and phones need to overcome.

If you've been interested in buying an [Android](#) handset and weren't convinced by the hardware and [software](#) initially available on the G1, however, the myTouch should pique your interest. There's lots of room for improvement, but the second act is definitely better than the first.

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