

# Hands on with Microsoft Kin: ain't nothin' like it

April 14 2010, By Brier Dudley

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Microsoft's Kin One and Kin Two.

Microsoft made some bold decisions with the "Kin" phones it unveiled Monday. The groovy handsets coming out in May are aimed at avid users of social networks, the kind of people who live in Facebook and would rather text their closest friends than call or -- God forbid -- e-mail them. It's also the first phone with the Zune entertainment software built in, giving it the ability to play and stream content.

In designing a phone/message/Web device for this set, Microsoft created a radical interface that wallpapers the screen with profile pictures of users' contacts. The screenplay constantly changes as the contacts update their social networks and share information.

To share photos or Web snippets with contacts, you click the item and drag it to a green button called the "Kin spot" on the bottom center of the screen. It's a nice concept, but it took some getting used to. During a brief tryout at Microsoft, the button I used the most was the hard key to return to the homescreen and start over.

It also took me a bit to figure out how to move backward in the menu, and to move away from the contact wallpaper to the "normal" list of phone features. It turned out I only had to swipe my finger to the right to call up that list, and tap the home button to move back.

I made a phone call and it sounded fine. Although the Kins have physical Qwerty keyboards, you dial with the on-screen keypad, which buzzes the phone a bit with each tap.

Kins also have a signature key on the keypad, with the winking ";)" symbol. Pressing it pulls up a list of emoticons for inserting into messages.

Of the two models shown to reporters, the small Kin One is more striking. It's the size of a makeup compact with a slightly textured back and well-designed buttons that blend into the case. It's also remarkable to have such a small device with so many capabilities. It's not only a [3G phone](#), but also a Web browser, social media manager, news reader, camcorder and a 4-gigabyte music and video player with streaming capability.

The Kin Two has a 720p camcorder and 8 gigs of storage, but it's more of a standard slider phone.

Where the Kin may have the biggest influence on other phones may be the companion Web service, the Kin Studio. It's basically a personal Web page provided for each phone, where users can bring their Kin

experience into a computer's browser, and the Kin content and activity is automatically synchronized with the online service.

The Studio pages can be used to see, store, download and manage photos and videos taken with the Kins' primo cameras. They also display contacts' information and a timeline to browse what's been done with the phone.

Buyers of Kin automatically get the Studio service -- plus unlimited online storage -- when they go through the mandatory registration process with Windows Live and enter the world of personal cloud services.

No software has to be downloaded to a Kin users' computer to access Studio -- it's all through the browser -- and it's equally accessible to Mac users.

Although the phone is aimed at younger buyers, a Verizon executive let on that the device could also appeal to parents who take and share lots of photos and videos of their kids. The Kin's video quality is "better than the Flip," John Harrobin said during the launch.

Strangely, Microsoft and Verizon declined to reveal the price at today's launch. Maybe they're waiting until they figure out what Apple and AT&T will charge for the new iPhones expected to surface this summer.

Other questions remain unanswered. For instance, there is:

- No word on if or how developers can produce Kin applications.
- No word on how the Kin might work with Xbox Live.
- No word on whether the Kin will work with Verizon's upcoming LTE

wireless service, which would help when streaming music and video to the devices.

- No word on whether there will be bundles and discounts for Zune Pass and Xbox Live subscribers.

Kin buyers who subscribe to the \$15 per month Zune Pass music subscription service will do so directly with Microsoft, and billing won't be combined with their wireless plan.

[Microsoft](#) was also bold when it came to naming the device. The good ol' boys in Redmond may have outdone themselves this time.

Product manager John Starkweather said the name was chosen because it refers to family and close friends -- the sort of people you'll stay in constant contact with using a Kin device. "Kin is the kind of family or friends you would shed blood for," he said.

If you're wondering, the Kin does not come preloaded with a selection of banjo music.

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