

Social networking features can't save Microsoft's Kin models

May 20 2010, By Troy Wolverton



Microsoft's Kin One and Kin Two.

Smart phones and feature phones used to be distinct from each other: One had a full-fledged operating system and the other did not; one targeted high-end business users, while the other was marketed to consumers.

But the line has blurred in recent years, due largely to the rapid evolution of smart phones. Many are now marketed with consumers in mind, and their prices have plunged to less than \$100 for some models.

Because they can use different applications, smart phones have always been more versatile than feature phones. But they now frequently can do a better job than feature phones at tasks feature phones were designed to

do.

This move by smart phones into territory once held by feature phones colored my thoughts last week as I tested Microsoft's new Kin phones. They incorporate some good ideas and neat features but are ultimately crippled by Microsoft's decision to make them feature phones.

The Kin phones -- the awkwardly squarish Kin One, which includes 4 gigabytes of storage and a 5-megapixel camera; and the more rectangular Kin Two, which packs 8 gigabytes of storage and an 8-megapixel camera -- run a version of Microsoft's Windows Mobile smart-phone [operating system](#). But they are resolutely feature phones. They focus on social networking, and because you can't install new applications on them, you can't do a lot else.

Microsoft has designed the Kins so social networking is front and center, literally.

Instead of having a desktop with [widgets](#) or a screen full of program icons, the Kins' home screen is divided into three different panels filled with different tiles, with only one panel of tiles visible at a time. By default you see the middle panel. You swipe left or right to see the others.

In the middle panel, called the Loop, the tiles are filled with pictures and status updates from friends on various social networks and with headlines from news stories from favorite sites. Users will find a tile with their own picture and latest status update at the top of the Loop.

I found this panel-and-tile interface jumbled and cluttered. But it does include some neat features.

Users can comment on the updates and news stories by tapping on their

tiles. They can update their own status or post to Twitter by clicking on their own tile.

And with a feature called Spot, users can share stories and friends' messages with others by dragging the tiles on which those stories and messages sit to a dot at the bottom of the screen. By tapping on the dot, users can upload the messages to social networks or send them to friends via text messaging or e-mail.

The social networking theme dominates the phones' features. The right panel of the home screen provides tiles of users' favorite contacts. By clicking on a tile, users can see their friends' contact information as gleaned from Exchange or from Facebook and other social networking sites.

The left panel of the home screen includes links to applications, many of which include social networking features. In the camera application, for example, you can see pictures and videos you have taken and instantly share them over social networks or via e-mail. You can also view photo albums recently uploaded by friends to Facebook and other social networks.

One promising feature of the Kin phones is called Kin Studio, which is essentially an online backup service. The phones automatically upload all the pictures and videos you take, messages you've sent and contacts you've entered to the Kin Studio website. If you go to that site on your computer, you can see a multimedia timeline of your activities on the phones, download pictures you've taken on them and even upload pictures to them.

That means much of what you do on a Kin device is preserved without you ever having to go through the process of plugging it into a PC.

But the Kins have some big shortcomings. For devices built around social networking, their access to such services is surprisingly incomplete and fragmented. While you can access posts on your friends' and your own Facebook pages by tapping your respective tiles, there's no Facebook application per se that allows you to see all of that information in one place.

Similarly, the phones don't support all features of the social networks. For example, you can't access your Facebook inbox, nor see direct messages that are sent to you on Twitter. You can't send instant messages, whether through social networking sites or outside of them. And the phones don't support streaming video at all, whether posted on Facebook, YouTube or any other site.

Also, the phones are limited to the social networks that they currently support: MySpace, Twitter, Facebook and Windows Live. If you use LinkedIn or hi5 or any other network, you're out of luck.

On a smart phone, this wouldn't matter so much. Assuming that the operating system had decent support from application developers, consumers would have a reasonable hope of having some of these holes filled in due course with third-party apps. But the Kins aren't [smart phones](#), so consumers will have to hope that Microsoft plugs the holes.

In the meantime, you're better off buying a smart phone instead.

MICROSOFT'S KIN ONE AND KIN TWO:

- Troy's rating: 3 out of 5
- Likes: Online backup service; feature for easy sharing; [social networking](#) links.

- Dislikes: Limited number of supported social networks; can't install new apps; home screen is jumbled.
- How much: \$50 (for Kin One) and \$100 (for Kin Two), both with a two-year contract

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