

iPhone 4 review: Nice phone, too bad about antenna problem, lack of LTE

July 15 2010, By Brier Dudley



Apple's iPhone 4 is a beautiful device, one of the nicest in the growing field of amazing smartphones on sale this summer. The software gives its touch-screen controls a buttery smoothness, plus a few handy new features. Inside is a snappy processor and a new battery that keeps the phone going all day with moderate use.

Apple gave the phone a new case that's more blocky, masculine and Teutonic. It looks like a robot's ice-cream sandwich -- two slabs of glass

with a stainless steel middle.

The [iPhone](#) 4 also works better than its predecessors as an actual phone, with dual microphones that help cancel out background noise.

Overall it's a great upgrade for the standard-bearing smartphone.

Which makes it too bad there's an elephant in this elegant, ultra modern room. The iPhone 4 has a [glitch](#) that can lead to its wireless signal abruptly dropping if you hold the phone a certain way.

A lot of users may never notice or be affected by this problem.

But it's still there and something to consider before committing to a phone on which you'll probably spend about \$1,000 per year to own and operate. The iPhone 4 costs \$199 for a model with 16 gigabytes of storage and \$299 for a 32 gigabyte version. They require two-year AT&T plans that range from \$55 to \$130 per month.

If you're going to obsess about it -- and Apple buyers like to think they're getting something close to perfect -- you might want to wait and see how this shakes out. It's already the subject of class-action lawsuits.

The [stainless-steel](#) band around the case cleverly doubles as the phone's antenna. That helped make the phone thinner -- Apple claims its 0.36-inch thickness makes it the world's thinnest smartphone.

Apple also says the new antenna works better than ever. As long as you hold the phone correctly.

If you cup the iPhone 4 in your left hand -- which right-handed people do when using a [touch-screen](#) phone -- it's easy to bridge two sections of the antenna and cause the signal to drop.

It doesn't take an elaborate grip to make this happen. On the two review units Apple loaned me it happened frequently when trying different applications. To see if it was just me, I asked a few other people to cup the phone in their left hand and it happened again.

I never dropped a call because of this, but it froze the Hulu Plus application when I tried streaming a video clip. When the bars dropped, the clip stalled and the app displayed an error message: "Hulu Plus could not load your request because your device is not connected to the Internet."

The Hulu drop made me question Apple's official explanation. On July 2, the company acknowledged the issue with a statement. Apple said it's been overstating reception, using an incorrect formula for the bars of signal strength displayed on the phone.

People experiencing the signal drop are probably in an area with a weak signal "but they don't know it because we are erroneously displaying 4 or 5 bars," it said. "Their big drop in bars is because their high bars were never real in the first place."

But my signal on the edge of downtown Seattle was strong enough to stream video, until I cupped the phone in my left hand. Maybe the streaming wasn't real in the first place.

Some enthusiasts have suggested sticking tape on the phone.



Steve Jobs e-mailed an upset customer and told the person to either hold the phone differently or buy a case for it.

Apple offers a nifty "bumper" case for \$30 that will insulate the antenna. Cases are probably a good idea anyway to protect the glass-encased device. But once the bumper's on, it won't fit into a charging dock.

The situation makes me think of people who buy stylish metal and glass coffee tables, then put tape and foam on the corners to protect their toddlers.

Another elephant in the room for everyone buying a smartphone this summer and fall is the big upgrade coming to the AT&T and Verizon networks in 2011. Both companies are rolling out a wireless broadband technology called LTE, but it will require new phones.

Apple and AT&T wouldn't discuss this with me, but research firm iSuppli dissected the iPhone 4 and found it didn't have LTE hardware, which would handle greater speeds and more data.

"It's not there, absolutely," said analyst Francis Sideco. "It would require a new chip set to support that."

But the average buyer may not care about those things.

The iPhone 4's June 24 launch was the most successful in Apple's history, selling 1.7 million units in the first three days.

There's more than just a slick new design.

The iPhone software now supports multi-tasking with some applications, so you can check e-mail while uploading photos, for instance.

Double-clicking the home button on the front screen calls up icons of the last four applications used, so you can quickly switch between them without returning to the home screen.



Recognizing that iPhones can get overloaded with apps, the new software lets you organize apps into folders. To do this, you press on an app icon until it starts wiggling, then slide it onto another icon. That creates a new folder and puts them both into it. You can add more apps to this folder by pressing and dragging them.

Apple developed a higher density screen that's crisper than previous iPhones, with four times as many pixels in the 3.5 inch diagonal display.

It's a nice display, but the technical improvements may not sway people attracted to the 4.3-inch screens offered on video-oriented smartphones based on Windows and Android.

The primary camera on the phone has been upgraded to 5 megapixels from 3 megapixels on the iPhone 3GS, and now has a flash and records 720p video at 30 frames per second.

Also new to the iPhone 4 is a front-facing camera that supports a video-chat feature called FaceTime. When you're making a call you have the option of launching a video session, in which the person you're calling is displayed full frame and you appear in a small window.

The interface is great but FaceTime is so limited it feels almost like a beta test. For now, you can only have video chats with other iPhone 4 users and both have to connect through Wi-Fi and not 3G cell service.

Reports last week suggested FaceTime is coming to the iPod Touch later this year. But I wonder if FaceTime is appearing now to get developers started building video-chat applications that will work fully once LTE service is available.

I feel for people trying to buy a new [smartphone](#) nowadays. It used to be that there was one obvious choice, Apple's iPhone.

Now there are exciting new smartphones from other companies appearing every month.

They work just as well as mobile browsers -- even better if you need a bigger screen -- and are getting plenty of applications.

At the same time networks are in the middle of a huge shift to new technology.

On top of that, iPhone 4 has to overcome concerns about its antenna and signal display.

But none of those things will matter for millions of people because the [iPhone 4](#) is so handsome and such a pleasure to use. As long as you hold it right.

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