

# Review: Windows Phone 7 a new start for Microsoft

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In this Oct. 18, 2010 photo, an Associated Press reporter holds the he AT&T HTC Surround, top, and the AT&T Samsung Surround in San Francisco, Monday, Oct. 18, 2010. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

When it comes to smart phones, Microsoft is itching to get back in the game. Microsoft was sick of watching consumers flock to Apple's iPhone and smart phones running Google's Android software as its own Windows Mobile software floundered. So the world's largest software maker started from scratch with its new phone operating system, Windows Phone 7, which wireless carriers are rolling out on smart

phones starting next month.

I tested three of them to get a feel for Microsoft Corp.'s latest work. The Samsung Focus and the HTC HD7 will be available Nov. 8 from AT&T and T-Mobile, respectively, while the HTC Surround is coming to AT&T by late November.

On its face, [Windows Phone 7](#) is unabashedly consumer focused and pleasantly easy to use.

The phone's main screen features a wall of bright tiles that you tap to open applications. You can make tiles for everything from websites to Facebook friends.

There are plenty of fun features, such as the ability to connect to the company's online game service, Xbox Live, and to download music, apps and games through Microsoft's Windows Phone Marketplace. If you pay \$15 per month for a Zune Pass, you can listen to as much music as you want right on the phone.

The operating software should also appeal to business users, as it integrates with e-mail and calendars from corporate Exchange servers and allows you to set up several different Exchange accounts. If you want to do work on the go, it includes mobile versions of Microsoft Office applications such as Word, Excel and PowerPoint.

Beyond this, there are lots of solid features that all Windows Phone 7 handsets will share: A minimum of 8 gigabytes of internal memory (like the [iPhone](#), there is no slot for a memory card), a five-megapixel camera and the ability to record high-definition videos, a multi-touch screen and a simple on-screen keyboard that is impressively accurate. For search and maps, unsurprisingly, the phone turns to Bing. It uses Microsoft's TellMe voice recognition software to operate voice controls.

There is no instant-messaging application built into the phone, though you will be able to download one. And you won't find any free turn-by-turn navigation software here as you'd find on [Android](#) phones, though the built-in mapping application is good-looking and simple.

Windows Phone 7 does have a feature I wish all [smart phones](#) had: Hold down the camera button even when the phone is locked and asleep, and the camera turns on. If you have a password set on your phone, you'll still have to tap it in to use the other functions, but it's handy for taking photos on the fly.

But will all this be enough to sway smart-phone-seeking consumers who have long been bombarded by sexy ads for the iPhone and Android phones, not to mention surrounded by others who are using those phones? I tend to doubt it.

Windows Phone 7 is good - far better than the hobbled software Microsoft briefly introduced on the Kin phones earlier this year - but it's not phenomenal. I immediately took a shine to its ease of use, but at the same time it feels limited. For example, the phones I tested had two main screen panels that just got longer and longer as I added more applications to them. Somehow, it doesn't feel as jazzy or cutting-edge as Apple's iOS4 or Google's latest Android release. Those phones have numerous, screen-fitted panels.

One area that I'm withholding judgment on is Microsoft's Marketplace. Just a few hundred apps were listed when I played with the phones, including a Netflix movie-watching app and one from location-sharing service Foursquare. So it didn't seem fair to judge it against the well-established app stores available for the iPhone and Android phones. Microsoft said it plans to add several hundred apps each week this year; based on that, it will be a while before we can gauge its competitiveness.

Beyond the [Microsoft](#) experience loaded onto the phones, each one has its own quirks, so below is a rundown of how each fared in testing.

- Samsung Focus (AT&T, \$200 with a two-year contract).

The Focus doesn't have the biggest screen of the group, but it had an AMOLED touch screen, which tends to have higher color saturation than standard LCD screens. Because of this, images looked the best and brightest on this phone, whether I was watching an episode of "Nip/Tuck" or drooling over photos of Italian food.

The Focus includes a more advanced camera than the other two, and you can adjust everything from image contrast to color saturation. There's a pretty good anti-shake setting, too.

The Focus also had the advantage of being the skinniest and lightest one I tested, at 0.4 inches and 4.2 ounces, which made it supremely portable. And with battery life rated for up to 6.5 hours of talk time, it should last through a day of taking photos, listening to music and making and phone calls.

- HTC Surround (AT&T, \$200 with a two-year contract).

The Surround's most interesting feature is a long speaker with a kickstand on its back that slides out from its right side. While I appreciated this setup for listening to music or watching videos, the sound wasn't incredible. I would have preferred a skinnier phone with just a speaker on the back.

The Surround's touch screen - 3.8 inches diagonally - was crisp enough for surfing the Web and futzing around on Facebook, but videos streamed from Netflix looked surprisingly pixelated.

The phone's 16 gigabytes of storage seems generous enough, but users may be unimpressed by its battery life, which is rated for up to just 4 hours of talk time.

- HTC HD7 (T-Mobile, \$200 with a two-year contract and \$50 mail-in rebate).

The largest of the bunch, the HD7 includes a 4.3-inch touch screen that makes a fine display for videos and a giant viewfinder for the phone's built-in digital camera.

The phone conveniently includes a Netflix app, so if you have a Netflix account, you can use it to watch movies and TV shows on your phone (other phones can download the app from the Marketplace). I started watching "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" over Wi-Fi and found it streamed well on the HD7's generous screen, though I had expected it to look sharper. The phone has a smartly designed kickstand hidden around the camera lens and flash. Over T-Mobile's network, the movie took longer to load than over Wi-Fi and often stopped to re-load, which was frustrating.

The big screen is good for playing games, too.

The HD7, which includes 16 GB of memory, is rated for as many as 6.5 hours of talk time. This probably won't be enough if you're having a marathon movie-watching session, but should hold up through regular multitasking.

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