

# Review: Gingerbread makes Nexus S a smart cookie

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In this Dec. 13, 2010 photo, the Nexus S smart phone from Google/Samsung , is shown in San Francisco. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

For some people, the holidays go hand in hand with gingerbread, in the form of houses or cookie-cutter men. This year, you can add smart phones - specifically, the Nexus S, the first device running the freshest version of Google's Android operating software, Gingerbread.

Developed by [Google](#) Inc. and [Samsung Electronics](#) Co., the phone has a cool curved glass screen, back- and front-facing cameras and the ability to read special tags on such things as stickers embedded with Near Field

Communication chips.

Combined with a fairly good price, it's likely to be on a number of holiday wish lists.

Best Buy stores will sell it for \$199 with a contract from T-Mobile, or for a more wallet-stretching \$529 if you want it to work on either T-Mobile's or AT&T's network.

The Nexus S is the follow-up to the Nexus One, an HTC Corp. phone that Google trotted out early this year but stopped selling months later as plenty of similar Android-running devices became available.

Although Nexus One was a good phone, it wasn't as amazing as Google thought it was. The company avoids this problem with the Nexus S, which is both a brainy and cool-looking handset.

First, let's get to the brains.

There are a number of subtle changes that come with [Gingerbread](#), such as zippier overall performance.

The most obvious update is with the on-screen keyboard. It is better than previous versions of Android at recommending words as you type, such as last names and other words that you've typed before, but hadn't been in the phone's original dictionary. The keyboard features more space between keys and a multi-touch capability that make typing easier and speedier than on Froyo, Gingerbread's Android predecessor.

The copy and paste tools are simplified in Gingerbread, too, with a little slider that appears on the screen that you can move to select text.

The phone's most-touted feature has been its inclusion of Near Field

Communication, or NFC, technology, which is a short-range wireless technology for transmitting data. This could ultimately function as a wireless payment system, eliminating the need for your wallet.

For now, though, Google is only letting the phone read NFC chips inserted in objects, such as movie posters you might pass at a bus stop. Once you are nearly touching one of these tags, the phone will automatically read it and, say, pull up a link to a film trailer.

To give reviewers an immediate sense of how this works, Google included a "Recommended on Google" sticker with the Nexus S the company loaned me for this review. Whenever the screen on my phone was active and within less than an inch of the sticker, it would add the NFC chip embedded in this sticker to my collection in a little app called "Tags." The tag contained a link to a YouTube video that explained the development of the Nexus S.

Cool, right? Too bad you can't really use the feature right now unless you live in Portland, Ore., where Google is distributing these stickers to some businesses. I'm all for adding technology to handsets, but it would be nice if I could actually do something with it near my home in San Francisco. Hopefully this will change in the near future, but it's still unclear.

More immediately useful is the Nexus S' bright screen. Like the phones in Samsung's Galaxy S series, it sports an AMOLED display, which basically means it will likely have higher color saturation than a standard LCD screen would.

This screen, which is 4 inches diagonally, is great for watching videos and surfing the Web, and it is super-sensitive to touch. It is a nice canvas for the latest version of Google Maps - out now for Android phones - which lets you use fingers to tilt the angle of the map and, in many cities,

see 3-D buildings when you zoom in.

The screen is also easy to see if you're not looking at it head-on, which is good if you want to share a video with a buddy. It was much brighter in sunlight than another Android phone I had on hand.

What makes the screen truly unique, though, is that it's slightly curved in the center. It's not clear to me why this is beneficial. The press release announcing the phone said it give the phone "a more ergonomic style and feel when held to the user's face," but my face couldn't tell the difference between the Nexus S and a similar-sized smart phone.

Besides giving the phone a bit of a more interesting look and helping it stay slender, it could potentially help protect most of the viewing area if you drop it because only the very top and bottom of the frame would touch the ground.

Wanting to stay on-trend with the iPhone and several other Android-running [smart phones](#), the Nexus S includes both front-facing and back cameras. The low-resolution front camera is handicapped because the phone doesn't include any video chat software, and software I downloaded either wouldn't work, or wouldn't work properly on it.

The 5-megapixel back camera takes crisp shots, but has some shutter lag - that annoying gap between when you press the shutter and when the camera actually takes a photo. I missed having a dedicated camera button, as I felt awkward focusing a shot and then maneuvering a finger to the virtual button in the bottom-right corner of the screen.

This camera is also surprisingly Spartan, feature-wise, with just a handful of white balance and exposure settings, but you can always make photos look more exciting by downloading a camera app from the Android Market (the free Retro Camera is a fun one).

I wasn't wowed by the phone's battery life, either. It's rated for up to 6.7 hours of talk time when using a 3G network, and in a day of what I would consider fairly light multitasking, I got about seven hours of life out of the phone. On other days it lasted longer, but I wasn't doing much more than checking e-mail, making a few calls, playing the occasional game of "Angry Birds" and looking up a restaurant in Google Maps.

Still, the [Nexus S](#) impressed me overall, especially with the freshening to [Android](#) that Gingerbread brings. You just may want to get one while they're hot.

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