

Smart phones: Slick handsets worthy of Santa's sleigh

December 1 2010, By Victor Godinez

The menu of smart phones is more diverse and interesting than it's ever been, and every carrier now sells multiple cutting-edge handsets.

Picking the right phone as a gift can be a tricky proposition, though.

"Phones are very personal for people," said Matt Palmer, director of sales for North Texas for AT&T mobility and consumer markets.

"They're very particular on the size and the color. Does it have a keyboard? How much memory? It's a very personal experience for people. We find that folks want to have a lot of say in what they're getting."

So if you want to play it safe, bring the recipient of your gift into the store with you or just stick to gift cards.

On the other hand, surprises can be fun, too.

Some holiday shoppers ask to have the new phones activated but kept in the box so they can ring under the tree on Christmas morning, Palmer said.

So if you're feeling adventurous- or if you're buying yourself a well-deserved mobile treat - here are the best smart phones available for the holidays from the major carriers.

All prices listed require a two-year contract.

AT&T:

-Apple iPhone 4: The ultimate no-brainer for any gadget fan. Apple's latest 3.5-inch machine has the highest-resolution screen of just about any phone ever made, is slim and sexy, and, with a case or bumper, has great signal quality.

There are hundreds of thousands of downloadable apps available for the iOS [operating system](#), and the hardware and software are extremely user-friendly. Your only real options are memory size: 16 gigabytes (\$199) or 32 gigabytes (\$299). If in doubt, just go with the 16-gig model.

Apple's manufacturing difficulties with making a white iPhone 4 to complement the basic black model have led to the ivory version being indefinitely delayed, which could become a cancellation.

-Samsung Captivate: This 4-inch Android phone (\$199) is a superb alternative to the iPhone if you're shopping for a Google fan.

The resolution isn't quite as sharp, but the Super AMOLED screen has amazing color quality. Like the iPhone, it's a touch-screen-only device and has no physical keyboard.

Google's app store - called the Android Market - is not quite as robust as Apple's, and the platform doesn't yet have Netflix or Hulu apps, if mobile video is a big deal for your recipient.

The Captivate is part of Samsung's new Galaxy S line of [smart phones](#); each of the big carriers has a similar version.

-Samsung Focus: Microsoft has completely revamped its mobile

operating system, and the new Windows Phone 7 is a nifty OS. It's intuitive, quick and attractive.

Most of the first handsets are rather uninspired, but the Focus is the best of the lot. With a great 4-inch display, Xbox 360 video game integration and a very light weight, the Focus (\$199) should have received a more appealing external design to complement its inner beauty.

Microsoft is starting from scratch with its app store, which makes this a phone only for those with patience and the willingness to live with a potential dud.

-BlackBerry Torch: While the Torch has some interesting features - the slide-out keyboard and new operating system both work well - this handset (\$99) has some major shortcomings.

The processor is too slow, and the screen - at just 3.2 inches with a mere 480x360 resolution - is almost painful to look at if you've played with an iPhone 4 or recent Android device.

Still, this is the best BlackBerry I've ever tested, so if you or your gift recipient are required to use a BlackBerry for work, this is your best option.

VERIZON WIRELESS:

-HTC Droid Incredible: The Droid phones on Verizon Wireless are all similar but have some key differences.

They're all Google Android devices, they all look like Darth Vader fashion accessories and they're all good. But you do have choices when it comes to screen size and keyboards.

The Incredible (\$149), for example, is a 3.7-inch touch-screen-only handset.

-Motorola Droid X: The \$199 X is also touch-screen-only, but it has a 4.3-inch screen, if you prefer larger images and more space for finger swipes.

Unlike the identically sized Evo 4G on Sprint, though, the X does not have a front-facing camera for making video calls.

-Motorola Droid Pro: This new device (\$179), which I've not yet tested, is intriguing because it sports a BlackBerry-like physical keyboard right on the front.

But I'm less excited by the small 3.1-inch screen running at a subpar 480x320 resolution. Most Android devices have resolutions of 800x480 or better, and the iPhone 4 is a stunning 960x640.

If you or your gift recipient are comfortable with a slideout keyboard and want a bigger, better screen, the Droid 2 (\$149) might be a better bet.

-Samsung Fascinate: This is Verizon's version of the Samsung Galaxy S.

Some hardcore users have complained that the device is locked to Microsoft's Bing search engine rather than Google's. While that is a bit of an odd feature on a phone running a Google operating system, Bing is perfectly serviceable.

SPRINT:

-HTC Evo 4G: One of my favorite phones, the Evo 4G (\$199) was the first handset available on a high-speed 4G network in the U.S.

While the definition of the term 4G has since gotten a bit muddled, this is still a great phone. The 4.3-inch screen is excellent, and the kickstand on the back makes the handset a nice portable movie player for airplane trips and other extended sessions.

You can also use the Android-powered phone to create a portable Wi-Fi hotspot for multiple devices, a particularly handy feature when you're in an area covered by Sprint's 4G WiMax network. When not in 4G territory, the phone reverts to 3G.

The EVO's biggest drawback is a mediocre battery. An extra charger cable to keep at the office or in the car is a good add-on.

-Samsung Epic 4G: Basically a slightly smaller version of the Evo, the 4-inch Epic compensates with a slide-out keyboard. Like the Evo, it also has a front-facing camera for video chat. Overall, a top-notch Android phone.

But the Sprint version of the Galaxy S series has one puzzling attribute: the price. At Sprint's official price of \$249, the Epic is at least \$50 more expensive than it should be. But Amazon.com's wireless store is selling it for \$149, so shop around if you're interested.

T-MOBILE:

-HTC G2: One of the best Android phones on the market, the G2 looks, feels and runs like a luxury device at the standard smart phone price of \$199.

The 3.7-inch display is married to a slide-out keyboard wrapped in an elegant combo of soft plastic and brushed aluminum. Even the battery cover is well-designed, with a button to pop it out so you don't have to claw at it with your fingernails.

The G2 is also one of the few T-Mobile phones built to take full advantage of the company's HSPA+ network upgrade. HSPA+ has traditionally been considered 3G, but T-Mobile has taken to calling it 4G since the speeds on it are close to or better than the speeds found on Sprint's 4G WiMax network.

Regardless of the marketing mumbo-jumbo, this is a great phone.

-HTC myTouch 4G: I haven't had a chance to test this phone (\$199), but the 3.8-inch myTouch 4G is another high-end Android phone with a touch screen only. It's also an HSPA+ device.

-Samsung Vibrant: Another 4-inch Galaxy S device, the Android-powered Vibrant (\$99) is just as impressive as the models on the other carriers. It's also a dead ringer for the older iPhone 3GS.

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