

Nexus S blends in with Android vanguard

January 28 2011, By Troy Wolverton



When Google unveiled the Nexus One early last year, it was clearly the best Android smart phone on the market. It's hard to make the same claim about the Nexus S, the second device in the series, which hit store shelves last month.

Partly that's because the [Android](#) market has developed over the past year. When Google launched the [Nexus One](#), only a handful of devices ran Android, Google's smart-phone operating system. And AT&T, the

nation's second-largest wireless carrier, didn't offer Android phones.

Nexus One was created as a flagship device to demonstrate to consumers and manufacturers the potential of Android. Google teamed with device manufacturer HTC to pack a speedy new processor, the latest version of Android and a refined user interface into a sleek new design.

Google also attempted to shake up the broader cell phone industry by selling the Nexus One directly to consumers at its full price rather than the discounted price that carriers offer to entice consumers to sign a two-year contract.

That effort failed, and the Nexus One sold only modestly. But the device succeeded wildly in spurring innovation on Android. Within months, device manufacturers and wireless carriers were offering a wide range of Android-based devices, many sporting technical specifications equal to or surpassing those of the Nexus One.

The [Nexus S](#) seems unlikely to have a similar impact. Manufactured by Samsung, it is decidedly less ambitious than the Nexus One.

Gone is the attempt to shake up the cell phone industry. The Nexus S is being sold through Best Buy, not directly by Google. And while you can get it without a contract, Best Buy is promoting it with a discounted price that comes with a two-year deal with T-Mobile.

Gone too is a serious attempt to set a new bar for Android. Yes, the Nexus S includes a fast new processor. Yes, it includes the latest version of Android. And yes, it has features not yet found on other Android phones. But many of these new features are incremental changes. The new 1 GHz processor is zippy, but most recent top-of-the-line Android phones have felt pretty snappy.

The Nexus One includes a near-field communications, or NFC, antenna, which eventually could be used to do a wide range of things. For example, you could go to a company's website by swiping your phone in front of a poster, or pay for your groceries by waving your phone in front of a cash register.

But NFC technology is in its infancy and isn't widely used. So for now, you can't do a lot with the NFC antenna. And given the rapid pace of change in the Android marketplace, features like the new processor and NFC antenna will certainly be matched shortly by new, non-Nexus Android devices.

Meanwhile, many other features on the Nexus S are "me too" additions already found on other devices.

It has a front-facing camera, but so does Apple's iPhone 4 and HTC's Evo 4G, both of which were released in mid-2010. It also includes a three-axis gyroscope, which can be used by games and augmented reality applications. That's a welcome addition to Android, but Apple started the trend with the iPhone 4.

The Nexus S comes up short on battery life as well. Samsung and Google say it gets six hours of talk time - compared with 10 for the Nexus One - but I think that's stretching it.

Also, the Nexus S works only with T-Mobile's 3G network. That's unfortunate because T-Mobile is the least popular of the major carriers and tends to have far poorer coverage than its rivals.

Samsung packed 16 gigabytes of flash storage into the Nexus S, giving it more onboard space to store music, videos and applications than most other Android phones. But unlike most other Android phones, you can't plug a memory card into the Nexus S to give it more memory. Apple

also doesn't offer a memory card slot in the iPhone, but it does offer a 32-gigabyte model. Google and Samsung don't.

The Nexus S includes Android version 2.3, dubbed "Gingerbread," which has new interface features, including a new virtual keyboard. Google claims this keyboard is more user-friendly than before, but I found it less so; I repeatedly mistyped words on the Nexus S.

Partly, that may have been because I'm used to the virtual keyboard on my iPhone. But as you type on the Nexus S, a row of suggested words appears above the keyboard. I found it all too easy to inadvertently tap on one of those suggested words when I meant to type a letter on the top row of the keyboard.

So I was unimpressed with the Nexus S. Here's hoping [Google](#) swings for the fences with the Nexus model, because its partners are doing pretty well adding incremental improvements on their own.

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