

Review: Verizon iPhone comes, but should you buy?

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This product image provided by Apple Inc., shows the Verizon iPhone 4G. (AP Photo/Apple Inc.) NO SALES

(AP) -- Ever since Apple's iPhone went on sale in 2007, Verizon Wireless customers have held out hope that, one day, AT&T's grip as its exclusive U.S. distributor would be broken.

That day arrives next week, when Verizon's [iPhone](#) goes on sale. Verizon is accepting preorders from existing customers beginning Thursday.

It's the same phone as AT&T sells, with a few small tweaks. The price is the same: \$200 or \$300, depending on how much memory you want. Verizon wants your signature on a two-year contract, just like AT&T.

But even if it's the same phone, Verizon does things differently from AT&T, so there are some important factors to consider if you're thinking about getting one.

The big difference is likely to be network performance. AT&T's network is notoriously congested in some cities, including San Francisco, where for a week I tested both phones side by side. Out in the country, Verizon has much wider coverage for broadband wireless data.

The Verizon model was generally speedier at loading maps, websites and videos. For example, I was already done watching a YouTube clip of an adorable sneezing baby panda on Verizon's phone when AT&T's finally gave up on loading the video. At times, I couldn't make a call on the AT&T iPhone but could easily do so on the Verizon one.

So Verizon was faster for me, but the situation could be the opposite in many places across the country. Where AT&T's network isn't congested, it's actually faster than Verizon's, at least where AT&T has made recent upgrades.

There are two other big changes.

Verizon's iPhone is the first to work on so-called CDMA networks, the type Verizon uses. AT&T uses GSM, a technology that's more widely used around the world. This means the Verizon iPhone has very limited international roaming abilities. It won't work at all in Europe, for instance.

Verizon's iPhone also includes Personal Hotspot, a Wi-Fi sharing feature

that is becoming increasingly common on smart phones. It lets you connect as many as five gadgets to the Internet through the iPhone. If you're stuck without an Internet connection for your laptop, for instance, you connect through the phone and Verizon's cellular network.

The feature is easy to use, but there's a price for this convenience: \$20 per month on top of what customers already pay for voice and data services. With voice, text and data plans, that could mean monthly bills topping \$110.

By contrast, AT&T lets you use the iPhone to surf on the Web on a single computer - and only by connecting the two with a USB cable or through Bluetooth. This, too, costs an extra \$20 per month.

Another thing to consider about Verizon's iPhone: If you're a data hog, or think you might want to be one, you might be drawn to Verizon's data plan, which allows for unlimited use.

AT&T got rid of unlimited-data plans for new customers last year. Most users get by with the 2 gigabytes of data allotted through its \$25-per-month plan, which is \$5 cheaper than Verizon's unlimited plan. But if you go over the monthly allotment you'll shell out for more data - \$10 automatically for every gigabyte or fraction of it over.

If unlimited data is a must, sign up now, because Verizon has said it will switch to limited-data plans some time this year. By getting an iPhone now, you can lock in the unlimited plan for at least two years.

Another thing to consider about Verizon's iPhone: You won't be able you use data services while making a phone call. That means that if you're chatting with your grandmother about her upcoming birthday, you can't put your grandma on speakerphone while ordering her a bouquet of tulips online. Nor can you look for new games in Apple's iTunes App

Store while jumping into that conference call for work.

It's annoying, though not a deal breaker, for me at least. And if you can connect to Wi-Fi, you will be able to use that to get online while talking on the phone.

Beyond the features, whether you get one will depend on when you last got your phone. If you are switching from another carrier and must pay hefty contract termination fees, it may not be worth it. Likewise, if you recently got a phone through [Verizon Wireless](#), you'll likely pay more than the standard \$200 or \$300 price.

One more consideration: It's likely a new iPhone model will be out this summer, and it's not clear whether Verizon will get it right away. If it will, then this is a bad time to buy the iPhone 4. If it won't, the new AT&T iPhone 5 might be attractive enough to justify getting that instead of a Verizon iPhone 4. Unfortunately, we probably won't get any answers on this for months.

If weighing the pros and cons get to be too much, just remember that whether you buy it now or hold out for the next iteration, you're still getting an iPhone, silly.

And when it comes to smart phones, that's a smart decision.

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