

# Whose 4G is fastest? AT&T, Sprint or Verizon

March 28 2011, By Mark W. Smith

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Just because you slap a shiny label on something doesn't make it so. All the major wireless carriers are now touting faster 4G networks, but the networks themselves are far from identical.

4G - the industry-wide term for the next generation of smartphone networks - is a wireless standard that is supposed to deliver a big speed boost for tasks like Web browsing and downloading files on the go.

[Verizon](#) has launched its 4G network in metro Detroit and Sprint has launched its 4G in Grand Rapids, Mich. The new networks are not available everywhere yet, so most customers are still stuck with 3G signals and slower [download speeds](#).

But other carriers, like the possibly soon-to-be-merged AT&T and T-Mobile, are promising faster speeds through enhancements to their current 3G network.

Armed with the three marquee 4G smartphones on the nation's top three carriers - AT&T, Verizon and Sprint - I set out to discover what 4G speeds customers could expect in cities across Michigan.

## AT&T HSPA+

Using a technology called HSPA+, AT&T claims that users will see "4G-like" speeds over its 3G network with a new set of 4G-enabled devices.

In my testing, AT&T's Motorola Atrix 4G never attained 4G or "4G-like" speeds.

In fact the Apple iPhone that uses AT&T's un-enhanced 3G network reached faster speeds than the "4G" Atrix.

The iPhone on 3G often got speeds more than three times faster than the Atrix 4G.

In Midland, the Atrix 4G reached a download speed of 1.42 megabits per second. An iPhone without the supposed HSPA+ enhancements reached 4.89 Mbps. In Lake Orion, the Atrix reached 4.6 Mbps, while the iPhone got 5.61 Mbps.

AT&T couldn't account for the discrepancy, declining to address why HSPA+ would see even slower download speeds.

"We're deploying 4G speeds on a cell site by cell site basis," AT&T spokesman Amy Grundman said.

At best, AT&T's claims are misleading at a time when consumers are facing tons of confusion over what 4G is. It plans to implement a new 4G LTE network similar to Verizon's later this year.

## SPRINT 4G

Sprint has 4G in Grand Rapids only, covering the city and a few suburbs. Sprint has offered no timetable for a wider Michigan launch of its 4G network.

In my tests, I was able to see download speeds that neared 6 Mbps, a modest increase over 3G speeds.

## VERIZON 4G LTE

Verizon's new 4G LTE network is the real deal.

On the 4G network, which Verizon says covers 80 percent of metro Detroiters, I was able to see consistent download speeds topping 10 Mbps across the area - a mark that is 10 times faster than most users see on the carrier's 3G network.

In downtown Detroit, I saw peak speeds reach 37 Mbps on Verizon's 4G LTE network.

That's huge.

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## MEET THE 4G PHONES

- Motorola Atrix 4G and laptop dock from AT&T

The Motorola Atrix 4G is a solid-enough Android-based smartphone. It has all the features you'd expect: Android 2.2 (Froyo), front- and rear-facing cameras and a dual-core processor.

The key innovation here, though, is the availability of a laptop dock.

Users can plug the Motorola Atrix 4G into a laptop cradle and use the computing power and Web connection of the smartphone to run a simple laptop experience.

It's a bit clunky in its execution - the Motorola Android operating system can be hard to navigate on a laptop screen - but the idea makes me excited for when this is the norm.

The smartphone is well on its way to becoming our window to the Web in all our tasks.

The Motorola Atrix 4G is \$200 with a two-year agreement from AT&T. The laptop dock is \$300 after a \$100 mail-in rebate with the purchase of the phone.

- HTC Evo Shift 4G from Sprint

The HTC Evo Shift 4G is the next generation of the HTC Evo 4G that Sprint launched as its flagship 4G-capable smartphone last summer.

The Evo Shift is more consumer friendly, featuring a slide-out physical keyboard and smaller screen than the Evo's mondo 4.3-inch touchscreen.

The keyboard is very comfortable to type on and features a dedicated "@" button - a big time saver when typing email addresses. It could use a dedicated row of numbers, though.

The HTC Evo Shift 4G is \$149.99 with a two-year agreement and after a \$100 mail-in rebate.

- HTC ThunderBolt from Verizon

The HTC ThunderBolt is the most heavily anticipated smartphone of the year, with its huge 4.3-inch touchscreen, 8-megapixel camera and mobile hotspot support for up to eight WiFi devices.

All of that and it runs on Verizon's blazing fast 4G LTE network.

It's far and away the best smartphone I've had my hands on this year.

At a weight of 6.32 ounces, though, the ThunderBolt does feel heavy.

Verizon is offering free mobile hotspot service on the ThunderBolt through May 15. Pricing for the feature after that has not been announced.

The ThunderBolt is \$250 with a two-year agreement from Verizon.

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## 4G DATA PLANS BY CARRIER

### AT&T

- Voice plans start at \$40 a month for 450 minutes.
- Customers can choose from 200 MB of data for \$15 a month or \$25 for a more realistic 2 GB of data.
- AT&T no longer offers unlimited data plans.

### Sprint

- Joint data and talk plans start at \$70 a month with unlimited data and 450 anytime minutes. An unlimited data and talk plan is \$100 a month.
- All buyers of a 4G [Sprint](#) phone must also add an extra \$10 a month to their bill, even if they live in a location with no 4G service.

### Verizon

- Unlimited data plans start at \$30 a month for the HTC ThunderBolt, the carrier's only [4G](#) phone. Voice plans start at \$40 a month for 450 minutes.

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## ABOUT THE SPEED TESTS

Wireless data speed tests were completed with the Speed Test smartphone app available on Android- and iOS-based devices.

All tests done in specific cities were done in the same location at the same time.

To download the free app, search "speed test" in the Android Market or Apple's App Store.

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