Microsoft's Mango update sweetens Windows Phone

December 15 2011, By Troy Wolverton

Hoping to revive its flagging smartphone efforts, Microsoft recently released a significant update for its Windows Phone software.

Dubbed Windows Phone 7.5 but code-named Mango, the new software, which just started to show up in new phones, adds a slew of new features. They include the ability to run and easily switch between multiple applications and to quickly scan bar codes and even book covers for more information about physical products, as well as deeper integration with social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

I've been testing a new Mango device - HTC's Radar 4G - for several weeks. I generally like the software and appreciate the updates. But compared with Google's Android and Apple's iOS - which dominate the smartphone market - Mango comes up short in some crucial areas.

Prior to Mango, Windows Phone basically didn't support multitasking. Users had to return to the home screen to switch applications. And they couldn't do things like listen to music streamed from a third-party music application like Spotify while using another application.

With Mango, they can. Taking a page from Apple, Microsoft is allowing applications to perform a limited number of functions in the background. Not only will applications be able to stream music from the Internet after you switch apps, but they also can continue to download files, and news applications can check for updates.

Users meanwhile can switch applications in much the same way that they can with an iPhone or an Android device. By holding down the back button, users can see their five most recently used programs, which are represented as thumbnail images. To restart that program, users just swipe left or right and then tap on a thumbnail.

The multitasking system works well and is a much-appreciated addition. But it has several shortcomings. While you can restart programs from the open apps area, you can't close them. Instead, you need to go back into the program and then hit the "back" button. You also can't see any other recently used apps beyond your five most recent ones. To switch to apps you used earlier - which may be still running - you have to go back through the home page.

Another key new feature in Mango is its much deeper integration with social networks. The new software adds support for Twitter and LinkedIn, and incorporates social networking features into many different native applications.

When you pull up an address book entry in Mango, you can see not only the person's phone number and address, but also pictures the person has posted on Facebook or Twitter and their recent posts on those networks also. In the messaging application, you can choose to send a text to a friend or send them a chat message via Facebook or can switch between the two. The calendar program pulls in events from Facebook.

This integration of social networks is much more extensive than what you'll find in Apple's iOS and reminds me a lot of some of the features Palm built into WebOS. My only complaint is that it isn't even more extensive. Among the services I'd like to see it connect to are Google's Picasa and Microsoft's own Skype.

The other big change in Mango is a collection of new features in its Bing

search app. Users can search the Web by talking to their phone. They just need to hold down the home button, and Mango will prompt them to speak their search terms.

Even cooler is that the Bing app can use the device's camera to automatically detect bar and QR codes and book, CD and DVD covers. Once it recognizes such things, the app will search the Web for information about the items and places where you can buy them.

Taken together, the new features make Mango much more appealing than the earlier versions of the Windows Phone software.

But many of the new features simply match features or apps long available for Android or iOS devices. And in some important ways, Windows Phone still comes up short compared to those operating systems.

There are far fewer applications available for Windows Phone devices than for Android or iOS. And it's not just the obscure apps that are missing; among the popular apps you just can't get on Windows Phone devices are Internet radio service Pandora, digital video service Hulu and even Skype.

And while you can update iOS or Android devices directly over the Internet, you still have to plug Windows Phone 7 devices into a computer to update them. Similarly, both iOS and Android devices now allow you to stream and download all of your own music from an Internet-based storage locker. Windows Phone 7 will connect with Microsoft's Zune subscription service, but it doesn't have anything comparable to Apple's iCloud or Google Music lockers.

Additionally, Windows Phone's built-in Web browser, Internet Explorer, doesn't support new Web standards to the degree the Android and iOS

browsers do, doesn't support Adobe's Flash technology and doesn't have enough users to persuade Web publishers to customize pages for it. The end result is that you can't run some Web applications, such as the one for Google Music, that will run on iOS and Android devices. And sometimes, slide shows and other multimedia content that you could see on those devices will return error messages in Internet Explorer.

So, while I've found a lot to like about Mango, I can't recommend buying a Windows Phone device over the iPhone or an Android gadget. You just can't do as much with it.

WINDOWS MANGO OS:

-Likes: New multitasking system; deeper integration with social networks; visual and voice search

-Dislikes: Relatively few applications; no support for over-the-air updates or a linked music locker service; Internet Explorer less capable than other mobile browsers

-Web: windowsphone.com

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