

Review: Amazon phone unlikely to catch Fire

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In announcing Fire, its first-ever smartphone, Amazon showed off some sparks of innovation. There are two standout features in particular: a service called Firefly that can identify everything from a song to box of cereal to a Picasso painting based on how something looks or sounds; and a technology Amazon calls Dynamic Perspective that adjusts what users can see as they tilt or move the phone.

As cool as those innovations are, they likely won't be enough to overcome the daunting obstacles the Fire will face, especially against Apple's iPhones and smartphones powered by Google's Android. This

Fire is more likely to burn out than to become a blazing success.

At first glance, the Fire appears unremarkable, a typical black slab with a nearly 5-inch screen.

But Amazon hopes some of the [phone](#)'s unique features will set it apart. The Fire runs Fire OS, Amazon's version of Android that it also uses on its Kindle Fire tablets, which puts content like movies and music on an equal footing with applications.

Amazon is also throwing in two free services - a year's subscription to its Prime streaming music and video offering and free photo storage on its servers of all the pictures users take with the Fire. And that's a reminder that Amazon likely sees this as more than a phone, but as a way to get its customers to buy more stuff from its online store.

The Fire also comes with Amazon's Mayday feature. Users needing help with their phone can push the virtual Mayday button and be connected quickly with an Amazon customer support representative. It's kind of like a virtual version of Apple's Genius bars.

But the really unique features of the Fire are Firefly and Dynamic Perspective. Users activate Firefly by pressing a button on the side of the Fire. The app can identify songs, TV shows and movies just by listening to them and can use that information to provide details about them from sources like Amazon's own IMDb. It can identify products by their packaging or by their bar codes, allowing users to instantly check their prices and order them via Amazon.

Firefly can also recognize phone numbers and email addresses printed on posters or written on scraps of paper, allowing users to call them or save them to their address book without typing them in.

Firefly has a lot of cool potential in part because Amazon is allowing outside software developers to tap into its underlying technology. At the launch event Wednesday, for example, company CEO Jeff Bezos showed how the MyFitnessPal app could use the Firefly technology to look up nutrition information for a bag of Cheetos simply from a picture of the cheese-flavored snack food.

The Dynamic Perspective feature is a touchless gesture system combined with a kind of 3D-viewing effect. With Dynamic Perspective, users can access menus, shortcuts or additional information by simply tilting the screen left or right, rather than by swiping across it. In some cases, the phone also uses those motions to change what it displays on its screen, an effect that looks a lot like one on Apple's iPhone 5S that shifts the wallpaper on that phone's home screen as you tilt it.

As cool as Firefly and Dynamic Perspective may be, I don't think they'll be enough to make it a hit product. It just has too much going against it.

The smartphone market is dominated to such an extent by Samsung and Apple that it's been extraordinarily difficult for other companies - even those with a long history in making phones - to gain any traction, despite whatever cool innovations they may offer.

Meanwhile, the Fire is going to be hobbled by several factors. One is its price. At \$200 for the base model with a two-year contract, the Fire costs the same as an iPhone 5S or a Samsung Galaxy S5, two of the leading phones on the market. And pre-announcement rumors aside, Amazon isn't offering any kind of deal on your cellphone subscription. So there's no financial incentive for the legions of iPhone or Samsung fans to switch to the Fire.

And if you use any carrier other than AT&T, you're out of luck. At least for now, the Fire won't be available on any other cellular provider.

The Fire is also likely to be hobbled by the fact that it can't access the Google Play store, which has far more apps than Amazon's own app store. More importantly, Amazon does not offer Google's own apps, including Google Maps and the official version of Gmail. So, if you use Google services - and who doesn't? - the Fire may not be for you.

So, while I'm excited to see Amazon offer some cool new innovations, I'm not enthusiastic about the prospects for the Fire.

TROY'S FIRST TAKE:

-What: Amazon Fire smartphone

-Likes: Firefly feature automatically identifies songs, products and even paintings; Dynamic Perspective feature allows users to access menus, other items by simply tilting phone; includes free one-year subscription to Amazon's Prime streaming media service; includes unlimited free cloud storage to backup photos taken by device; high-resolution screen and camera.

-Dislikes: No access to Google Play store and Google apps; Amazon's own app store offers a fraction of the total Android apps available; only available on AT&T; no discount on price of phone or service.

-Specs: 2.2 GHz quad-core processor; 4.7-inch, 1280 x 720 pixel screen; 2.1-megapixel front and 13-megapixel rear cameras.

-Price: \$200 for 32-gigabyte model, \$300 for 64-gigabyte model, both with a two-year contract.

-On the Web: amazon.com

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