Review: Amazon's Fire phone good for a first effort

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Amazon may be new to the smartphone business, but its Fire phone doesn't feel like a first effort.

The new device, which Amazon started shipping on Friday, offers many of the features you'll find on other smartphones - a high-quality display, a speedy processor, a high-resolution rear camera and an integrated store with access to thousands of apps, millions of songs and lots of videos. It also has a voice control system similar to Apple's Siri, a front camera that can be used to make video calls and an email program that can connect to corporate mail systems.

But the Fire goes beyond just covering the basics. It has some unique features that make it stand out from the crowd.

For one thing, Amazon offers Fire buyers a free year of its Prime service, which provides streaming videos and discounted shipping. That's a $100 value and makes the phone a more interesting proposition if you are a big Amazon customer.

Other unique features can be found in the device itself.

At the top of the screen, you'll find a virtual carousel filled with large icons representing apps you've recently used, books you've recently read or movies you've recently watched. Underneath the carousel, you'll find items related to the highlighted app or piece of content. When the camera app is front and center in the carousel, you'll see your recent pictures. When the maps app is highlighted, you'll find links to recent locations you've searched for.

The carousel makes it easy to find apps or content you frequently use. But the links below it can be even more helpful, because they can quickly return you to the task you were doing when you last used the app.

Unfortunately, not all apps have this extra capability when they are in the carousel. With those apps, the Fire will typically show links to apps it

thinks are related, rather than to content within the app. When Netflix was at the center of the carousel, the Fire recommended that I download Pandora.

Beyond its interface, the Fire offers two other unique features: a visual and audio search app called Firefly and something called Dynamic Perspective, which, by tracking the orientation of the device and users' line of vision, can adjust what the Fire displays on its screen.

Firefly uses the Fire's rear camera to identify products by their cover, packaging or barcodes. It also can identify songs, TV shows or music by simply listening to them. And it can pick out telephone numbers and email and Web addresses from business cards, posters and other printed materials. Consumers can use Firefly to compare prices for products, or buy them from Amazon. It also allows users to dial phone numbers without having to type them in.

I used Firefly to quickly identify the book I was reading and then buy an e-book version of it from Amazon's Kindle store. I also used it to identify a song I was listening to and instantly create a station based on it in iHeartRadio.

But Firefly is currently limited in what it can recognize. Except when an item had a barcode, about the only thing Firefly recognized consistently in my tests were books. It couldn't identify other things, even when their labels or brand names were clearly visible.

When Firefly does recognize things, there's typically not a lot you can do with that information other than shop Amazon for the product.

Amazon promises that Firefly will become more useful in the future. It has opened up the feature to outside developers, allowing them to incorporate it into their apps.

The other feature that Amazon hopes will set the Fire apart is Dynamic Perspective, which uses motion detectors and a system of four cameras - one placed on each corner of the phone's face - to detect the orientation of the device and to track what users are looking at. Based on that data, the Fire can alter what's on the display, giving it a kind of 3-D effect. Some apps, such as the maps program, will reveal extra information if users simply tilt the device to one side or another.

Dynamic Perspective has a lot of potential when it comes to games. Instead of swiping on the screen to look around in a virtual environment or to steer an on-screen character, users can simply tilt the device or move their head. I tested a game called "Lili" that used this feature to great effect. It was much more natural to play it on the Fire than to be constantly swiping the screen when I played it on my iPhone.

For the most part, though, Dynamic Perspective feels like a gimmick and an often annoying one. Sometimes you want to just see information on a screen without having to tilt your head or the screen itself.

The biggest shortcoming of the Fire is its lack of apps. Because the device runs a custom version of Android rather than the Google-approved version, it can't link to the Google Play store. Users have access to Amazon's Appstore instead, which offers only a fraction of the apps available in Google Play. Among the missing are Google's own apps, such as Chrome and Google Drive, as well as apps such as movie service Vudu and virtual ticket service Eventbrite.

The Fire is a great first effort for Amazon and it's worth a look if you are a big customer of its online store. But its standout features need polish and its app selection needs broadening to be a true competitor to what Apple and Samsung have to offer.

What: Amazon Fire smartphone

Likes: Firefly feature instantly identifies books, other products, allows users to comparison shop on Amazon; Dynamic Perspective feature allows users to access menus and navigate games without using their fingers; includes a complimentary year of Amazon's Prime discount shipping and streaming video service; "carousel" interface makes it easy to go directly to recently received email or frequently used features within particular apps; glass case feels solid; offers twice as much storage as comparably priced iPhones from Apple; display size is ideal compromise between readability and ability to use with one hand; Mayday feature offers speedy connection to live technical support.

Dislikes: Relatively heavy. App store selection small compared to other Android devices and the iPhone, and lacks many apps, including many of Google's popular apps; except for use in games, Dynamic Perspective often feels like a gimmick; Firefly can identify relatively few everyday objects beyond books, and does little besides connect users to Amazon; only available on AT&T.

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.

Web: amazon.com

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