

Review: Larger iPhones eliminate reason to switch

September 19 2014, by Anick Jesdanun



People wait to buy the new Apple iPhone 6 and 6 Plus devices, outside an Apple store in Hong Kong Friday morning, Sept. 19, 2014. The iPhone 6 and 6 Plus were released on Friday in Hong Kong. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

It's easy to dismiss Apple's new iPhones as merely catching up to Android.

After all, phones running Google's Android system long have had larger screens. In addition, many Android phones already have the wireless

chips that iPhones are getting for making credit card payments without pulling out a card at retail stores.

But the new iPhones are a big deal for one simple reason: Only Apple has the advantage of building both the hardware and the software, so iPhones are easier to use and more dependable.

There are many flavors of Android out there, and some phones won't run the latest apps or work with accessories such as smartwatches. In addition, many leading apps come to the iPhone first or have features exclusive to iPhones.

Android phones still have some advantages. Samsung's flagship phones are still slightly larger than the new iPhones, for instance. Their cameras have higher megapixel counts—though that's just one factor in what makes a good photo.

What the new iPhones do is eliminate screen size as a reason to avoid iPhones.

The question, then, becomes: Which one?

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— Size considerations.

The iPhone 5, 5s and 5c have screens measuring 4 inches diagonally. The iPhone 6 boosts that to 4.7 inches, while the iPhone 6 Plus is at 5.5 inches. Yet the new phones are thinner than the smaller models.

Apple gets rid of glass in the back in favor of an all-aluminum body with curved edges. The new iPhones don't feel as boxy as previous models.

And the new phones make good use of the larger screens. Those with poorer eyesight can choose a "zoom" option so that everything gets blown up to fill the extra space, just like larger Android phones. Otherwise, you can fit in more content, including an extra row of icons on the home screen.

The iPhone 6 Plus also allows apps to rearrange their layout in horizontal mode. Content appears in two columns, so you're not switching back and forth as much. The drawback: The Plus is huge for those who don't regularly carry a backpack or purse.



A man shouts to an Apple premium reseller store after failed to buy the new Apple iPhone 6 and 6 Plus devices, in Hong Kong Friday morning, Sept. 19, 2014. The iPhone 6 and 6 Plus were released on Friday in Hong Kong. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

I personally find past iPhones easier to carry and fit in the pocket, especially when I go out running. Apple will still make last year's 5s and 5c available, at reduced prices. The 5c is essentially 2-year-old technology, so the 5s is the better option.

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— New features.

The 5s doesn't have the new iPhones' faster processors, but its speed should be adequate for the next year or two. But here's what you'll miss, besides the bigger screen:

Only the new phones have the mobile payments technology, so you can start using Apple Pay next month. A new barometer sensor measures elevation, so fitness apps can credit you for climbing stairs and hills.

Where the new phones shine is in the camera. Although the rear cameras stay at 8 megapixels, compared with 16 megapixels in the flagship Samsung phones, performance has improved.

Both iPhones have new technology for faster and more accurate focus. The Plus model also has a physical image stabilizer to help reduce shake, especially in low-light settings. The iPhone 5s and 6 use software tricks to do that.

I took the iPhone 5s, 6 and 6 Plus, the Samsung Galaxy S5 and Microsoft's Lumia Icon to Central Park to take about 250 photos and 30 videos.

In my limited tests, photos on the new iPhones weren't noticeably better, but that's because the 5s already takes good photos. The Icon tends to take better night shots, but its response time is slow and night images

sometimes look grainy and distorted. I have found the camera on the 5s to be consistently good, and the new iPhones won't disappoint.

Where improvement is obvious is in some new features:



A customer shows off the new Apple iPhone 6 and 6 Plus at a store in Tokyo Friday, Sept. 19, 2014. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

— There's now a second slow-motion mode—for video at one-fourth the normal speed, rather than just half the speed in the 5s.

— A time-lapse feature lets you combine multiple still shots from the same location over a period of time. Think of those fast-moving videos showing an entire building being constructed in just a minute. I had fun making joggers in Central Park appear to be superhero fast.

— The front camera can now take 10 shots a second in a burst mode, matching what the rear camera can do. You can choose the best shot for selfies. The front camera also lets in more light than before.

The time-lapse and front burst features are part of the new iOS 8 software, so the iPhone 5s gets the improvements with a free download. All iOS 8 phones also have an easier way to adjust exposure, in case the sensors don't get it right.

— Storage and pricing.

It's tempting to get the cheapest models with 16 gigabytes of storage—in the case of the iPhone 6, for \$200 with a two-year service contract. But phones fill up quickly with photos, music and apps, and iPhones don't let you add storage.

Fortunately, Apple is doubling the storage for its top two models. So \$300 at the contract price gets you 64 gigabytes instead of 32 GB, while \$400 gets you 128 GB rather than 64 GB. I recommend getting at least 64 GB.

For the Plus models, add \$100 to the price. If you don't want a contract with your carrier, add another \$450 for an unlocked version.

Remember: if you have a discounted rate with AT&T because you have fulfilled your two-year contract, getting a new phone at a subsidized price will bump your monthly service fee back up.

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