Review: BlackBerry's keyboard not enough to make it stand out in Android pack
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BlackBerry, the longtime device maker that helped pioneer the smartphone market but is now struggling to stay relevant, has done what previously might have been considered unthinkable.

Earlier this month, BlackBerry released a phone called the Priv that runs not on one of the company's own, home-brewed operating systems, but on Google's Android. The new phone has a BlackBerry keyboard and some of the company's software, but it looks and works like an Android device.

I wasn't bowled over by the Priv. It's a good Android device, but not a great one. And I'm not sure it has enough to it to stand out in a crowded field.

The main way the Priv attempts to distinguish itself is with its keyboard, one of the trademark features of older BlackBerry devices.

In the current touch-screen era, physical keyboards aren't usually a good fit, because they lead to small, hard-to-read screens or clunky designs. But with the Priv, BlackBerry has created a well-designed large-screen phone. The Priv's keyboard slides out from under a thin screen. The Priv isn't as svelte as the iPhone 6s, but it's not that much thicker and its rounded edges help to make it seem thinner.

If you've used a BlackBerry in the past, you'll like the keypad; the size, shape and action of the keys have a similar feel. But the keypad is more than just a throwback; BlackBerry has updated it for the touch-screen age. The keypad itself is touch sensitive, and you can use it like a trackpad. You can scroll through a Web page or move a cursor in a document by swiping in one direction or another.

As you're typing, the Priv will attempt to predict which words you want, and you can select them by swiping up on the keypad - in theory. In my tests, swiping up on the keypad to select a word worked about half the time at best. Meanwhile, the cursor navigation seemed incomplete; I wanted to be able to select or highlight words to cut or delete them, but you can't do that directly with the keypad.

In addition to the keyboard, another key feature of the Priv is the software that BlackBerry has pre-loaded onto the device, most notably BlackBerry Hub. Hub acts as a kind of universal inbox. From within it, you can see email from your various accounts, text messages and messages you've received via Facebook. You can also see recent calls, respond to calendar invitations and view a list of your upcoming appointments.

If you have a hard time sorting through all your messages, Hub can be a big help. You can look at messages from individual accounts, view only unread or flagged messages or just see those with attachments.
I like the idea of Hub, but I was disappointed with the way it worked on the Priv. For one thing, it was sluggish. It could take five seconds to even start loading an email after I tapped on it and as much as 20 or 25 seconds before the message was fully loaded and I could read or reply to it. If you have a bunch of messages to get through, that's a long time to wait for each one.

The Hub app also crashed several times in my tests, and I ran into several weird bugs. In one case, I couldn't get rid of an email in Hub that I had already deleted in Gmail on my computer. In another case, Hub loaded some new email messages but wouldn't display them in its main view.

The other main way that BlackBerry is trying to set the Priv apart is by emphasizing privacy protection and security. BlackBerry says it's "hardened" Android on the Priv to better protect users from malware and other security threats. The company also emphasizes that users' data on the Priv is encrypted and thus protected from unauthorized viewers. But it's hard to assess just how much more secure the Priv is or whether its encryption scheme is any better than that on other Android phones.

One thing in the Priv's favor on this front is BlackBerry includes with it an app called DTEK. The app gives you a kind of security score card that takes into account whether you've put in place a passcode on your device and whether your operating system has been compromised. It also can be configured to alert you when particular apps are using some of the phone's features, such as when Facebook wants to know your location or another app wants to use your microphone.

Some of the Priv's other features also compare well with other high-end rivals. It has a beautiful, high-resolution screen and a powerful camera that takes sharp pictures. Unlike some of its rivals, it has an SD card slot, which allows you to add extra memory should you need it.

Like other big-screen phones, the Priv also has a large battery. But I was disappointed by its performance. It drained quickly, even with moderate usage and even when I was conscientious about shutting down apps.

But the Priv's bigger problem is that it is priced like a standout phone, but its key features don't really add up to one. If you're nostalgic for a BlackBerry keyboard but didn't want to lose Android to get one, maybe the Priv is for you, even at $700. But if you've never used a BlackBerry keyboard or never was enamored with one, you likely won't miss it.

6.5 OUT OF 10

BlackBerry Priv smartphone

Likes: Large, high-resolution screen; touch-sensitive physical keyboard; DTEK software that evaluates security settings; pop-up "widgets" save space on home screen; SD memory card slot

Dislikes: Relatively pricey; burns through battery quickly; Hub is buggy, sluggish and crash-prone; touch features on keyboard inconsistent

Specs: Dual-core 1.8GHz processor paired with a quad-core 1.44GHz chip; 5.4-inch, 2560 x 1440 display; 32GB storage; 2 megapixel front and 18 megapixel rear cameras

Price: $700

Web: blackberry.com

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