Palm Pre Debuts to Praise and Criticism

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - The long-awaited Pre has nice new touches, but Palm Inc has a lot of work to do if the device is to be a serious competitor to the iPhone. The device seemed to live up to some expectations but fall short on others for this reporter, who played around with the Pre for just a few days.

The interface does feel new and interesting with some lovely bells and whistles. But features like photo-viewing and surfing are sometimes painfully slow and social networking integration does not go as far as this correspondent hoped.

SHAPE AND SIZE

So what's Pre like? It's shaped like a soap bar with a smooth touchscreen display that has a discrete round button protruding from the lower part that minimizes applications. It has an unobtrusive on/off button at the top edge, plus a volume button on the left edge.

Gently push the bottom edge of Pre to reveal a tiny QWERTY keypad that tilts slightly to you. The keyboard is very compact, and people with relatively big

fingers may find it too small.

This may upset anybody who hoped the physical keyboard would be an improvement on the iPhone's virtual one.

MESSAGING

Perhaps Pre's biggest novelty is how it handles messaging. From within one application, you can exchange texts with phone contacts and swap instant messages with buddies who use either AOL instant messenger or Google Talk.

Accessing multiple messaging systems from a single platform is great because different users like different services.

Another treat is alerts containing the first line of new, incoming messages, which appear at the bottom of the screen whatever you might be doing: messaging, Web-surfing or gaming.

This may be a welcome change from, say, checking your message when BlackBerry's flashing red-light alert appears.

But, for email, Pre does not seem to provide the alerts. It was easy to set up Gmail but to get new email, you tap on the inbox tab and wait several seconds to view it, whether the email was short or included heavy attachments.

This may deter those looking for a BlackBerry alternative. But they may be happy to hear that once an email is open, it is very easy to download a word document or a PDF. To magnify the text, spread two pinched fingers apart on the screen.

CUT, COPY AND PASTE

Unlike today's iPhones, Pre supports copy-and-paste. But the controls are harder to

use than on a BlackBerry, which simply employs a scroll ball to select text.

On Pre, drag your finger over the text to be selected while holding down a keyboard button. Once text is selected, go to a menu and then a submenu at the top of the screen to tap on cut, copy or paste. On BlackBerry you press one button and scroll through one menu to choose.

FACEBOOK

One exciting promise from Palm was Pre's integration with social networking services such as Facebook. But it appears limited at least initially.

A user can easily add Facebook friends as Pre contacts. You can text, call or email contacts if they include these contact details in Facebook. Many do not.

Pre-Facebook contacts will at least have Facebook photos of friends, and the option of adding their phone numbers manually. The photo shows up on the screen if they call.

But here's the rub. Pre does not support writing to Facebook friends right from your contacts. Palm suggests writing to your Facebook friends via Pre's Web browser, but its just not as easy as the other messaging application.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Pre has a 3-megapixel camera you can use to take photos in horizontal or landscape mode. This reporter had to reboot Pre to make both options work but then took some nice photos.

However, the big upset here was the photo display. Pre is designed to let you scroll through your photos by dragging your finger across the screen. In practice

it seemed to take as long as 10 seconds for each photo to become clear and unpixelated. Then can you move to the next one. Definitely no iPhone.

MULTI-TASKING

Pre is strong in multi-tasking, the ability to have different applications open at the same time. On iPhone, you have to close and open applications to switch.

Pre has a fun way of displaying multi-tasking. Apps look like a series of cards that sit side by side on the screen. To switch, drag a finger over each and tap on the one you need. When done, you close an app by flicking your finger up the screen to "throw" it closed. This is good fun.

There is a limit however on how many apps you can have open at once. Depending on what you're using, the limit seems to vary from 8 to 12. Video service YouTube seems to tax the phone more than other apps. When this correspondent had 8 apps open, including YouTube, an alert popped up warning it was too many.

BATTERY AND NETWORK SPEED

We did no scientific measures to check Pre's battery life but there were some worrying signs. After a night charging and a morning's data use it begged for a recharge at 1 p.m. An email from Palm explained that turning off instant messaging would help preserve power. Sound advice, but tough to hear that the coolest feature would drain the battery.

Data speeds on Sprint's network were variable. YouTube videos worked well sometimes but often came with several interruptions. At times it took too long to get on websites as commonly used as yahoo.com. Sometimes they worked very well.

Palm's suggests using Wi-Fi -- a fast short-range web link -- whenever possible. This worked well but Wi-Fi is not always available when you're on the go. Pre is an attractive alternative but it remains to be seen if consumers have enough patience for its quirks.	

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