

Review: Samsung Galaxy S phones do Android proud

The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -- The more phones that hit the market using Google's Android operating software, the harder it is for each offering to stand out from the black-and-silver crowd.

Samsung is the latest company trying to turn heads, hoping consumers will snatch up its new Galaxy S smart phones, which are both attractive on the surface and well-appointed under the hood.

AT&T already sells the Samsung Captivate, and T-Mobile offers the Vibrant. Two more are coming: Sprint will start selling the Epic 4G at the end of August, and Verizon plans to roll out the Fascinate this fall.

I tested the Captivate, Vibrant and Epic 4G, which all have plenty of great features in common: bright, crisp screens; 5-megapixel cameras that can also take high-definition videos; speedy 1 Ghz Hummingbird processors and Google Inc.'s easy-to-use Android operating software.

With all this and more, one of these may be the 'droid you're looking for.

Probably the most obvious feature on each Galaxy S phone is a sharp AMOLED touch screen that runs 4 inches diagonally and dominates the face. AMOLED screens tend to have higher color saturation than standard LCD screens, and they can be thinner. In plain English, it meant that the videos I watched looked great - sometimes even better than on Apple Inc.'s new iPhone 4.

I was also jazzed to see that each of the phones includes Swype, a new third-party application that lets you type on virtual keyboards by simply swiping your finger around from one letter to the next. Swype alone is almost a good enough reason to get a Galaxy S phone. It's only available on a handful of handsets so far, but given how quickly and accurately you can type with it - much faster than pecking away one letter at a time - I bet it will be on tons of touch-screen phones within a year.

The phones are packed with version 2.1 of Google's Android operating software, which means you get features such as voice-recognition capabilities for dictating e-mails and instant messages and the Google Maps Navigation application for obtaining turn-by-turn directions. They're not starting out with the latest version of Android, though, which has even more voice command options.

The phones have plenty of memory, too: The Epic 4G includes a 16 gigabyte microSD memory card, while the Captivate and Vibrant have the same amount of internal storage.

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This could come in handy when Samsung opens up its forthcoming Media Hub, which will let Galaxy S users rent or purchase movies and TV shows on their phones.

Beyond all the similarities, there are plenty of things that make each Galaxy S phone unique:

- Samsung Vibrant (T-Mobile, \$200 with a two-year contract and after a rebate).

Though the Vibrant's black body with silver trim looks like an older iPhone, it distinguishes itself by being a generally solid Android phone that's good at multitasking.

The phone is the lightest of the bunch, tipping the scales at 4.2 ounces. While its design isn't revolutionary, it has familiar-looking rounded corners, so it fits really nicely in the palm of your hand.

The biggest issue I had with the Vibrant was its battery life. The phone is rated for up to 6.5 hours of talk time. That should be plenty for voice calls, but if, like me, you're more interested in checking Facebook, taking photos and surfing the Web, this phone will run out of juice by late afternoon.

The Vibrant also seemed to freeze up fairly frequently, such as when I was searching the Android Market for new applications or using ones I already have. Most of the time, though, it worked speedily, whether I was snapping photos or streaming music from online subscription service Rdio.

- Samsung Captivate (AT&T, \$200 with two-year contract).

The Captivate is a sleek, thin slab of a phone - heavier than the Vibrant but just as skinny. It fits well in a back pocket and is easy to hold and type on using Swype.

The Captivate is rated for even less talk time than the Vibrant (just under 6 hours, at best) but it did seem to conserve power better than its sibling.

I was impressed by Captivate's responsiveness, as it rarely froze up. It was happy to do whatever I wanted, whether I was watching a YouTube video or checking out the Samsung widgets included on the phones, such as one that lets you see your friends' latest social network updates.

Part of what makes the Captivate intriguing is its understated looks. Besides the silver "Galaxy S" logo on its back, it doesn't scream "awesome smart phone." This gives it a classier vibe than the Vibrant or Epic and will appeal to consumers who want a strong handset that isn't too flashy.

- Samsung Epic (Sprint, \$250 with two-year contract and after a rebate).

Rolling out Aug. 31, the Epic 4G will work on the standard 3G cellular network and

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the newer-generation 4G network from Sprint. You'll need to live in Seattle, Chicago or one of the other 46 markets where Sprint now offers 4G to try both, though, and it will suck up more battery life. Otherwise, like myself, you'll be using it on 3G.

The Epic is the only one of the bunch with a front-facing camera so you can video chat over a built-in program called Qik or stream video live to Qik's website. And unlike the FaceTime video chat function on the latest iPhone, which only works over Wi-Fi, the Epic will let you conduct video chats over Sprint's cellular network as well. You can chat with any other phone that also works with Qik for video chat.

Unfortunately, neither worked that well when I tried chatting with a friend on another Sprint phone, the HTC Evo 4G. My friend looked like a pixelated mess on my phone, and he thought I looked distorted on his. With Wi-Fi, he looked clearer, but still more like a pointillist painting than a person.

The phone also works as a wireless hotspot, providing Wi-Fi Internet access to up to five devices (though you'll need to pay \$30 extra each month for this).

Size-wise, the Epic is a bit of a beast. It weighs nearly 5.5 ounces - more than the other two Galaxy S phones I tried. That's largely because it also has a standard QWERTY keyboard that slides out; it may be the largest I've come across thus far. The keyboard was so big, in fact, that I mostly preferred using Swype to type on the Epic.

The Epic 4G's battery, which is rated for up to 6.5 hours of talk time, held up pretty well over hours of multitasking.

With these initial Galaxy S phones, Samsung managed to cram an impressive amount of features into good-looking packages.

There's still work to be done as far as battery life is concerned, but their brilliant touch screens and fast performance, coupled with the Android software, are sure to win over plenty of consumers.

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