Review: BlackBerry Z10 is good stab at rebirth for embattled brand, but has uphill slog

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Are you ashamed to have a BlackBerry? It's not exactly a status symbol any more, at least not in the U.S., after it got left in the dust by the iPhone. Now, there's a new BlackBerry that wants to get back into the cool club: the Z10.

It's the first phone to run the new BlackBerry 10 operating system, and it is, at first blush, a very good stab at regaining at least some of the cachet of the BlackBerry.

The problem is that no one has ever succeeded in turning around a failing smartphone maker. Remember the Palm, anyone? It's simply a brutal industry. So even if the Z10 does everything it set out to do, it might not be enough to save Research In Motion Ltd., the home of the BlackBerry. The company is changing its name to BlackBerry, but that could just be the prelude to riding the brand into the sunset once and for all.

It doesn't exactly help that the Z10 looks like every other smartphone on the shelf. It's a flat black slab with a touch screen, nearly indistinguishable at 15 feet from the iPhone 5 or a bevy of Android smartphones. The screen measures 4.2 inches diagonally, a bit bigger than the iPhone but smaller than most Android phones. It will go on sale in the U.S. in March, probably for about $200 with a two-year service contract, in line with the iPhone and other rivals.

Turn it on, and the differences become more evident. Older BlackBerrys are great communications devices, but are poor at multimedia and at running third-party apps, something the iPhone excels at. The new BlackBerry 10 software is a serious attempt at marrying these two feature sets, and after a few hours of use, it looks like it succeeds.

BlackBerry 10 was delayed for about a year, and it seems as if the extra time was put to good use. The software is, for a first release, uncommonly slick and well thought out, completely unlike the PlayBook disaster of two years ago, when RIM released a tablet computer that couldn't do email.

The Z10 is easier to use than an Android phone. It is more difficult to use than the iPhone, but it is also more powerful, giving you faster access to your email, tweets, Facebook status updates and text messages.

These communications end up in the "Hub," a window that slides in from the left side of the screen. Whatever you're doing on the phone, you can get to the hub with a single swipe on the screen, and then go back. It's a great feature for the always-connected.

The software is good for on-the-go types as well, because it's designed for one-handed use. While texting, you'll have one hand free for holding your bag or pushing open doors.

It's also completely touch-oriented, which isn't what you'd expect from a BlackBerry. You don't use a hardware buttons to navigate the phone at all: They're just to turn the phone on or off, or adjust the volume. To get around, you swipe across the screen. Up, down, right and left swipes all do different things, but they're fairly easy to remember. Sadly, it's reminiscent of webOS, the last hurrah of smartphone pioneer Palm Inc. It was a great, swipe-based interface that never found an audience and was ultimately put to rest.

Very rarely does BlackBerry 10 display a "Back" button on the screen, which is a blessing. I find Android's always-present "Back" button a huge annoyance, since it's rarely clear where it will take me. Will it take me back one screen or kick me out of the application I'm in? Only one way to find out: pushing it.

BlackBerry diehards will lament the lack of a physical keyboard - they'll have to wait for the Q10, a model in the more traditional BlackBerry form. That's due this spring. But before writing off the Z10, these loyalists should try its on-screen keyboard. It's really very good. It provides more vertical space between the keys, imitating the steel bands that separated the hardware keys on the BlackBerry Bold. It's very accurate and easy to use.

The Z10 will also have a replaceable battery, something lacking on the iPhone. Screen quality will be good, too, at 356 pixels per inch, compared with 326 for the iPhone 5 and 306 for Samsung's Galaxy S III. Unlike the iPhone, the Z10 will allow you to expand storage with a microSD card, and it sports a chip letting the phone act as a credit card at some payment terminals and share data wirelessly when tapped against some other phones. The Z10 is heavier than the iPhone, though - at 4.78 ounces to the iPhone 5's 3.95 ounces.

So why does the Z10 and BlackBerry 10 face such an uphill battle?

Well, the library of third-party applications is the biggest reason. The iPhone and Android have a huge head start when it comes to getting developers to make applications that run on their phones. RIM says BlackBerry 10 will launch in the U.S. with about 100,000 apps. That sounds like a big number, and it includes important apps such as Skype and Facebook.

But it's inevitable that the iPhone will have apps you want but can't get on BlackBerry 10. There's no Instagram, no Netflix. It's also obvious that the number includes some apps that were written for the PlayBook tablet and don't work well on the smaller phone screen.

But the biggest obstacle to a RIM comeback is simply that the iPhone and Android have become the default for phone buyers, and few will see a reason to try something else. Microsoft, which has vastly more resources than RIM, has tried for two years to get people to buy Windows Phones, with very little to show for it.

BlackBerry 10 is nice, but I can't point to anything about it that would make me say: "Forget those other phones: you have to buy this one."

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About the BlackBerry Z10:

It's the first of the phones to use the BlackBerry 10 operating system, an attempt to bring the once-pioneering BlackBerry in line with the iPhone and Android devices. It's not coming in the U.S. until March. All major carriers will have it, likely for about $200 with a two-year service contract.

The Z10 will have only a touch-screen keyboard. BlackBerry fans wanting a physical keyboard will have to wait at least a month for the BlackBerry Q10.

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