

Motorola Droid Review - The first Android 2.0 phone

By Vanessa Bura

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Motorola is quick to point out that the Droid's 480-by-854-pixel display offers 409,920 pixels, more than double the 153,600 pixels that the 480-by-320-pixel, 3.5-inch screen on the iPhone 3GS offers. The Droid's resolution also compares well against that of Android 1.6-based phones such as T-Mobile's myTouch 3G, which has a 3.2-inch, 480-by-320-pixel display.

The Droid's keyboard doesn't occupy the full length of the phone; a four-way directional pad with a select button sits on the right side. The keys are backlit, but since they're mostly flat, you'll need to keep an eye on what you're typing until you get a feel for the phone. A small lower lip protrudes from the bottom when the phone is closed, revealing only the Verizon logo and the microphone. Like other Android phones, the Droid has an accelerometer and reorients quickly when you hold the display sideways.

Unfortunately, the handset has a few hardware-design quirks. The keyboard is so shallow--and the keys themselves are so flat--that our testers (with various hand sizes) had trouble using it. In addition, the top keys are very close to the ledge of the display, so your fingers are constantly knocking against it. The Droid is also missing physical Talk and End keys, which are pretty much standard on every other cell phone ever made. You must access these controls from the call application.

The Droid, which supports the 1900MHz and 800MHz CDMA EvDO bands on the Verizon Wireless network, comes with a 1,400-mAh battery rated at 270 hours of standby time and 385 minutes of talk time. It also has a preinstalled 16GB memory card and offers Wi-Fi and Bluetooth 2.1 support, which includes the use of stereo headsets and a Wi-Fi adapter.

The phone provided excellent call quality, even in a New York hotel lobby full of noisy Phillies fans headed to Yankee Stadium for the World Series. Parties on the other end of my calls reported no problems.

Especially snappy is the Droid's Web browser, which loads images quickly thanks to the powerful 550MHz processor and speedy hardware-accelerated graphics. Though you are at the mercy of your 3G high-speed data network coverage, once you're in it, Web surfing is breezy and smooth. Video from sites such as YouTube looks equally impressive; the playback of a high-definition YouTube cartoon ("Sita Sings the Blues") was excellent, with no stalling or audio dropouts. Audio also sounded great piped through a pair of high-quality headphones. The straightforward music player supports playlist building, album art, and shuffle and loop playback modes. You can purchase DRM-free music at the Amazon MP3 store via the preloaded app on the device.

Preinstalled on one of the three home screens are icons labeled Messaging, Phone, Contacts, Browser, Maps, and Market. Notably absent on the Droid are Verizon's V Cast services, which include live streaming

videos and other entertainment offerings. A new Power Control widget allows one-touch control over power-hungry features such as the Bluetooth and Wi-Fi adapters, the GPS receiver, and the backlight. You can turn off data synchronization to save additional power, too.

As in Android 1.6, in 2.0 a universal search from the phone's home page delves into the contact list, browser history, and other content in the phone, as well as on the Internet. And as with all Android devices, you'll need a free Google account to take advantage of the phone's key features, including the contact list and the calendar, which are synchronized with your Web-based account.

You'll also find the familiar notification bar at the top; you can expand it by touching it and dragging it downward. At the bottom (or the side, in landscape mode) is a slide-open launch window with icons for all of the installed applications and links to the settings menu and other phone features.

Android 2.0 builds on the Google Maps features introduced in Android 1.6 by adding a Layers option that lets you place extra location-enabled features on top of the map you're viewing. A Wikipedia layer, for example, generates icons for locations on your map that have Wikipedia entries.

Since Google Maps navigation is voice-enabled, you can say the name of your destination to get turn-by-turn directions. One nice aspect of the new navigation features is the nifty use of Google's Street View: As you approach your destination, an interactive photo of the actual location pops up with an arrow to point you in the right direction. Instead of having to look for a building number, for example, the Street View provides visual confirmation that you're in the correct place--or at least mighty close to it.

The dedicated camera button provides quick access to snapshot and video taking. The Droid's 5-megapixel camera includes a dual-LED flash and supports DVD-quality video recording and playback at 720 by 480 pixels. As in Android 1.6, in 2.0 you handle the camera and video capabilities in a single window. The camera has a respectable amount of advanced features, such as scene modes, color effects, and white balance controls. Snapshots that I took outdoors looked great, especially on the Droid's stunning display. Indoor shots, however, suffered from a significant amount of graininess. The dual-LED flash tended to blow out colors and details for indoor shots, as well.

Another nice touch is how the Droid interacts with its accessories. When you place it in its car-window mount (sold separately; price not yet announced), the Droid automatically enters "Car Home" mode, in which it looks more like a stand-alone GPS device. Large icons labeled View Map, Navigation, Voice Search, Contacts, Search, and Home fill the screen, and the display rotates as needed.

When you insert the Droid into an optional tabletop dock (sold separately; price not yet announced), it sits at a good angle for watching videos or just poking through e-mail. It immediately switches to a sort of alarm-clock mode and displays the time in large figures while providing other information, such as the temperature, in smaller type below.

The challenge for Android app developers is to take advantage of 2.0's new features, including its ability to link apps more closely to the contact list. As you view a contact, you will see a floating set of icons for the services the person is connected to, such as Facebook. Note that while most existing apps should run fine on Android 2.0, some that were optimized for Android 1.5 and 1.6 may have to be tweaked for the new version.

The Motorola Droid certainly stands out among the growing Android army due to its superior hardware and enhanced 2.0 software. But will the Android Marketplace catch up to the iPhone's App Store? Therein lies the key to success for the Droid. The Droid certainly lives up to its promises and does a lot of things the

iPhone doesn't. The iPhone will probably keep its smartphone throne for now, but it will have to deal with a powerful new competitor.

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