Review: Motorola Revives Razr Name with Smartphone

Rachel Metz, AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — With its super-slim, stylish frame, Motorola's Razr phone became incredibly popular in 2004 — a smash hit that Motorola hasn't been able to replicate. Now, many years later, the company is trying to recapture some of that magic by ushering the Razr into the smartphone age.

The new Droid Razr, available Friday through Verizon Wireless for $300 with a two-year service contract, echoes the svelte form and good looks of its ancestor.

It has many great features, including a big touch screen and the ability to use Verizon's high-speed 4G LTE network for zippy Web surfing. It also has Motorola's MotoCast service for wirelessly streaming and downloading content stored on your computer.

Yet I couldn't get much time to enjoy the phone because using it with LTE quickly wore down the battery.

And while the phone runs the latest version of Google's Android software that is available for smartphones, shoppers may be tempted to wait. Verizon will soon offer Samsung's Galaxy Nexus, which will come with an even newer version of Android called Ice Cream Sandwich. The Droid Razr is expected to get that update, too, but not until next year.

Don't get me wrong, though: The Droid Razr is a hot phone.

Gazing at it for the first time, I had the same thought as I did when I first laid eyes on the now-ancient Razr phone: How the heck did Motorola make the phone that thin? Except for a chunk at the top that houses the rear camera, flash and an external speaker, the Droid Razr is slimmer than any other smartphone. It's just a third of an inch thick. It's light, too, at 4.5 ounces.

It makes other smartphones — Apple's iPhone included — look chubby by comparison.

Its back is covered in diagonal gray and black lines composed of Kevlar fiber, which is meant to increase the phone's strength. Another perk, though one that's not visible: The phone has a water-repellent coating both inside and outside that is meant to shield it from damage caused by the occasional spill.

The Droid Razr boasts a 4.3-inch display, which is too big to fit too comfortably in my hand, but plenty large for watching videos and checking out websites. It isn't the highest-resolution screen you'll find on a smartphone, but colors looked bright

and images were crisp.

The screen also works well as a viewfinder for the Razr's 8-megapixel camera. The camera snaps photos pretty quickly. I was able to capture sharp shots in bright and low light.

The phone is speedy overall, owing to its dual-core processor and 1 gigabyte of memory. I had no problem streaming tunes while I bounced between IM'ing friends, checking up on gossip sites and using Google Maps to find a good restaurant near my office.

The phone has a big battery that promises 12.5 hours of talk time. To keep the phone slim, the battery is built-in and cannot be easily replaced.

And, as expected, it won't last long if you're on Verizon's faster data network: Using a combination of LTE and Verizon's slower 3G network to surf the Web, stream an episode of "The Office," download apps and stream music from Pandora, I only had 15 percent battery life left after two-and-a-half hours.

That seemed lame. Of course you can lengthen the battery life by not using the LTE network, or by severely limiting how much you use it. But access to this high-speed network is one of the phone's best features, improving all sorts of Web-related tasks, including video streaming and Web surfing.

Fortunately, Motorola included a very neat app called Smart Actions that can alleviate a bit of the battery drain. Smart Actions can be set to automatically alter the Razr's settings at a certain time, either by using built-in "rules" that you can modify or by using ones you determine.

For example, you can set a low battery saver rule to dim your screen, turn off the phone's GPS and stop content from syncing in the background when the phone's battery reaches a certain level or when you get home. You can also set rules to support your own laziness. I instituted one that makes the phone launch its music app whenever I plug in a pair of headphones.

The phone also includes a service called MotoCast, which comes across as Motorola Mobility Holding Inc.'s answer to Apple Inc.'s iCloud content streaming service. With MotoCast, you can wirelessly access and download documents, music, videos and photos stored on your Mac or PC on your Razr.

Unfortunately, because content you stream with MotoCast is housed on your computer — not on remote computer servers as it is with iCloud — that computer must be on and connected to the Internet for you listen to The Beatles or watch old episodes of "The Simpsons." I don't know about you, but I don't leave my home or work computer online all the time.

You can download files to the phone for use at any time, but even with the phone's 32 gigabytes of storage space you can't possibly store as much content as you could on your computer.

Still, MotoCast is free. The software, which works with a number of Motorola smartphones, was easy to set up on my home computer. On the Razr, streaming songs show up in the phone's music app, denoted by a tiny icon, and they played flawlessly. Videos are less obvious: I found them in the phone's file manager and gallery apps. They didn't seem to stream as well, looking pixelated despite my connection to LTE.

Beyond the strengths and weaknesses of its hardware and software, though, I couldn't forget about the Razr's $300 price tag. This is higher than most other Android smartphones offered by the major wireless carriers. Even the cheapest iPhone 4S can be had for $200. It's sure to make some potential buyers balk.

The Droid Razr is as impressively skinny and stylish as its namesake. But shortcomings like its brief battery life when using LTE will likely make it hard for this smartphone to become as popular as its predecessor.

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