The Note: Tablet, Smartphone or Both?

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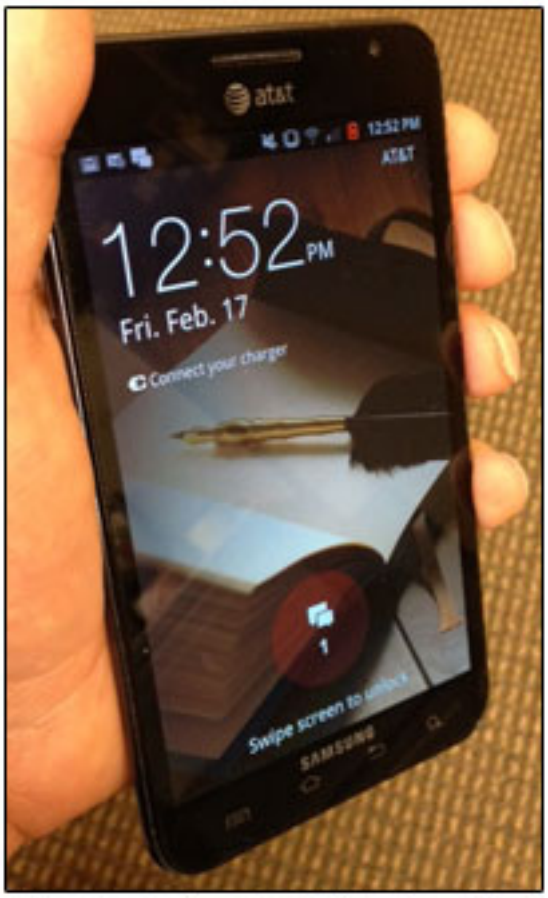
I say right off that I am flummoxed by the Samsung Galaxy Note. This is one of those devices that you just know you want to like but upon arrival aren't exactly sure how it fits into your life. In fact, the Galaxy Note, try as it might to bridge the gap between the tablet and the smartphone, has a hard time really fitting anywhere, which is perhaps its biggest drawback when considered as a user's sole means of communication.

As a Smartphone
Because the Galaxy Note is really just a large Galaxy II S, we don't have to hem and haw about too many particulars other than to run down the specs and consider whether the device's size prohibits it from being an effective phone.



The Note is a definite handful. The Note is a gorgeous device. Samsung is quickly joining Apple and Nokia in the upper-echelon of top hardware manufacturers. The Note is slim, lightweight, features a titanium bezel with volume toggle on one side and power button on the other. At the top there's a headphone jack and on the bottom there's a Mini-USB port and a place to place to put the Note's S Pen Stylus.

The LTE-capable Galaxy Note for AT&T comes running Android 2.3 (Gingerbread),

which Samsung says will be upgradeable to Ice Cream Sandwich, and packs a whopping 1.5 GHz dual-core processor. The battery is one of the larger ones on the market, coming in a 2400 mAh, but it's needed to power that 5.3-inch Super AMOLED display. The rear-facing 8-megapixel camera is ample and takes crisp pictures, while the 3-megapixel front-facing camera works great for video chat. The Note includes 16GB of internal memory and will accommodate an SD card up to 32 GB.

So the Note really is all that and a bag of chips, at least on paper (there's a pun there). It's fast, beautiful and the quirky S Pen stylus lets you draw pictures and maps, take notes, write a grocery list. There's all that and still I found it a completely impractical choice for a smartphone, as much as I wanted to come down on the other side of the fence.

I suppose use case is at the root of my conclusion. I think the smartphone is organically limited to the extent that it has to be portable. The Galaxy Note just isn't. I mean, sure it'll fit in the back of your jeans pocket, but not comfortably. And where are you going to put this thing when you go to the beach or hop on a motorcycle in the summer? This is to say nothing about the fact that the Note looks and feels absolutely ridiculous when you're holding it up to your ear. Imagine making a call on one of the new, smaller Kindle eReaders and you'll catch my drift.

The Note (left) next to the new Droid 4.

What makes the size factor of the Note so disappointing is that it really is handy to have all that real estate at your disposal. Add in the S Pen, and the Note is truly practical for certain tasks. But most are still going to prefer something smaller for day to day operations. I'll add the caveat that people who carry a bag with them everywhere and are devoted Bluetooth users might be the perfect candidates for the Galaxy Note.

As a Tablet

Let me repeat myself: I am flummoxed, fascinated and mystified by the Note. It's as

though Samsung has dropped the Note in an area that is essentially the doldrums of device size, where one can neither justify its largeness as a smartphone nor its smallness as a tablet.

Which brings us to that fancy S Pen, the differentiator that really is as novel as it is enticing and will undoubtedly be the factor that pushes many over the edge in choosing and unwieldy smartphone.

We all know what Steve Jobs said about the stylus, something to the effect that if a device has one, the battle has already been lost. And yet the S Pen, which is made by digital tablet maker Wacom, is smooth, relatively responsive and incredibly useful in a lot of situations. In fact, it would be great if Apple teamed up with Wacom for the next iPad. Digital artists everywhere would love such an accessory for working in drawing applications on Apple's slate.

On the Note, the S Pen allows for some general note taking, marking up photos and indicating edits on documents or maps. There are even a few preinstalled games on the Note that incorporate the stylus. But let's get one thing straight. The S Pen will not replace the standard steno pad and ink-based pen.

For sure, you can scribble down a couple of words during a meeting, or write out a grocery list and shoot it off to your partner, but you're not going to record the minutes from a 2-hour meeting. Taking notes on the Note for any length of time can be tiring. I found that if I let the heel of my hand down it sometimes triggered one of the soft buttons — Menu, Home, Back, Search — down at the bottom of the screen. Also, while lines come smoothly off the end of the stylus, there is a bit of a lag and if you don't keep constant pressure on the tip, you'll see breaks in your writing, which is frustrating if you intend to write in cursive.

Is the Note really a tablet? I'm not sure there's an answer to that question other than to say the Note moves us closer to erasing the fine line between phone and slate.

Check out an example of writing on the Note below:

Take Note
I'll give Samsung props for trying with this device. They did it, and they did it well, but the audience is decidedly small for a phone this big, as Dell found out with the Streak. Still, any device that competently stretches the boundaries of device categories will undoubtedly push the market towards more novel form factors.

At $299 with a 2-year contract, the Note is a good buy if you're the right customer for this kind of hybrid device. With LTE connectivity, the Note might just fit the bill for cash-strapped college students looking to kill two birds with one stone and get a pseudo-tablet and smartphone.

It's worth noting that AT&T has zeroed in on the customer looking to pick up a

smartphone and a tablet. The carrier now offers a range of packages that include a tablet and smartphone for one price. Customers can pick up a Pantech Element tablet and a Pantech Burst smartphone for $249. Or for that matter, a Samsung Galaxy Tab 8.9 and Galaxy S II smartphone for $479. Here's the rub — and perhaps yet another reason to some might choose the Note — both of these packages require 2-year contracts on both devices, whereas with the Note you're only paying for your smartphone data package.

I'm interested to see how the analysts categorize the Note and whether it will go toward Samsung's media tablet or smartphone sales numbers. But I think I'm more interested to see what kind of traction Samsung gets with the S Pen and whether we'll see more of it in future tablets and smartphones. To be sure, you'll want to at least take note of the Samsung Note.

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