

## Review: BlackBerry Z10

Ben Munson

*\$200 with two-year contract from AT&T*

It's not just the diehard fans who've grown tired of the buzzards circling BlackBerry. Even users loyal to other OEMs and eco-systems must, at this point, have had enough of how the Z10 and the new BlackBerry 10 operating system it supports represent a do-or-die moment for the Canadian smartphone legend. Despite continual decline in market share and the recent subscriber losses, it's still too soon to predict BlackBerry's fate. But it is clear to see, after spending some time with the Z10, that the company is making tangible strides toward shaking off some vestiges of what a BlackBerry was and embracing what it can be.

### The hardware

On first impression, the BlackBerry oozes elegance. The sleek slab of glass and plastic easily outclasses the touchscreen bricks BlackBerry used to make, like the Torch. Its profile comes close to that of the Lumia 920, while its rounded corners echo the iPhone 5 and its face closely resembles the HTC One.

The minimalist front shows off the 4.2-inch LCD display, a 2-megapixel camera and a red notification light between two thin strips of matte black housing containing the ear piece and microphone. The sides, consistent with the phone's .35-inch thickness, remain mostly untouched save for micro USB and HDMI ports, a center-mounted power button on top with a headphone jacket next to it and a silver volume rocker with a mute button in the middle. The back, marked only by some branding and an 8 megapixel camera and flash side-by-side, has a wonderful, luxury car interior feel to it. It feels solid enough that it's easy to forget the back can be popped off to access the battery, SIM and SD memory.

The whole package feels sophisticated and understated, which ultimately results in less immediate impact but ensures it's a phone that you'll still be happy showing off near the end of your contract.

### The software

Much was made early on of BlackBerry 10's reliance on gestures—the phone features no buttons on the front, physical or otherwise. It's a big departure from the OS paradigm to which BlackBerry formerly assigned itself and requires a small window for learning the ropes. But once you get the flow, it essentially becomes intuitive.

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Without a home button, a swipe up from the bottom of the phone's frame becomes the single tool for unlocking and backing out of applications. When using the phone horizontally, like while taking pictures or playing a game, I got a little frustrated with how I had to return the phone to its upright position to back my way out. And the side to side swiping seemed a bit too sensitive at times, causing me to swipe clear across the screen I was trying to get to.

But it gets easier and then it gets fun, with the phone's dual-core 1.5 GHz processor up to the task of keeping the flow smooth. It was especially nice to flip so quickly to the Hub, a one-stop shop for all your communications needs. At first it looks like a daunting pile-up of a unified inbox, but a quick swipe to the left reveals an easy sub-category menu, making for much more efficient management of everything from LinkedIn to voicemail.

The OS packs many more nice surprises like a great browser, easy integration with Dropbox and a wonderful keyboard. Mimicking the physical QWERTY that BlackBerry built much of its reputation on, the on-screen keys take on the same layout and include the frets between rows, where predictive text appears—often above the key you intend to use—and waits to be



flicked up to the text field.

### **The display and camera**

The display presents a curious issue: it's a more than adequate size at 4.2 inches but like the iPhone, it leaves so much real estate on the front uncovered that you can't help but wonder why it couldn't have been bigger or, vice versa, why the phone couldn't have been smaller. Beyond that, it's crisp, clear and bright, everything that's expected from the display on a modern smartphone. It's a good canvas for a better than average camera.

The BlackBerry's camera certainly isn't perfect. It's hampered by some issues with focus and color reproduction, but it mostly makes up for those issues with performance and cool tricks. The camera launches quickly from a dedicated button on the home screen and photos snap almost immediately after you touch the screen. Videos, shot in 1080p, look sharp. Time Shift Mode, similar to Nokia's Smart Shoot or Samsung's Best Shot, is an easy and fun detail, allowing you to cycle through numerous shots of subjects' faces.

### **The specs and battery**

The Z10 doesn't pack anything under the hood that will surprise. It supports LTE, HSPA+ and UMTS along with 802.11 Wi-Fi. It packs NFC, Bluetooth and mobile hotspot capability. It's healthy with 2 GB of RAM and willing to expand its 16 GB of storage by 32 GB. But beneath its back panel it hides an ugly secret in the form of its 1,800 mAh battery, a relatively weak power source that produces a disappointing amount of bang from a full charge. With moderate use, including messaging and browsing, the Z10 just barely made it through an eight-hour work day. The fact that the battery is removable, so it can be replaced with a fresh pack, makes the dismal battery life more acceptable. But a full day's use out of a full charge shouldn't be too much to ask for out of a smartphone at this stage in the game.

### **BlackBerry World**

One of the biggest concerns approaching the Z10's launch was app availability in the BlackBerry World storefront. Those doubts end up being validated the more you peruse the offerings. There are knock-offs of popular apps like Netflix that don't come close to the functionality of the originals. There are staples but they come missing features, like Facebook showing up without chat or Messenger. But BlackBerry World should close the gap between more mature offerings like Google Play and the App Store, especially if the eco-system proves popular enough to attract more developers.

Something it has right over the App Store is the housing of apps, music, TV shows, movies, ebooks and magazines all under the same umbrella. It may seem like a small timesaving measure to eliminate separate storefronts, but it makes shopping

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sessions more convenient.

### **The verdict**

The Z10 is a good phone that can stand up in terms of hardware, software and performance to just about any other flagship smartphone on the market today. BlackBerry has made some genuinely refreshing moves with its gesture-based OS and it has whipped up a brutally efficient communications device, for business or personal. But if BlackBerry really is counting on the Z10 to keep the company's ship from going under, it may have chosen a paddle a bit too much like the others. The Z10 definitely won't push BlackBerry ahead of the pack, but it should keep it in the race.

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