

Review: NetGear's Zing Hotspot Highlights Sprint's LTE

The Wi-Fi in our office is seriously overworked and IT isn't exactly crazy about everyone connecting their personal devices to it. Likewise, getting a signal from my chosen wireless provider in this building is almost impossible. As a result, the ability to check or send text messages during the work day means venturing outside for a signal. Most days I throw my phone in a drawer and forget about it until quitting time.



The last few weeks, however, we've been playing around with Netgear's tri-band LTE-capable Zing Mobile Hotspot. It's been a luxury in our office for those who know the password. The Zing supports Sprint's 800MHz, 1.9GHz, and 2.5GHz spectrum bands, and much to our surprise, we've been picking up some decent in-building LTE speeds (even though Madison, WI is not as yet an officially announced Sprint LTE market). Placed on a window ledge here on my desk near a window, even colleagues across the office, at the center of the building, were able to grab a

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strong connection. Heck, we even managed to stream some of the PGA Championship with our Zing (don't tell the boss).

Here's some initial impressions of the time we spent with NetGear's latest and greatest hotspot.

Build quality

The Zing feels sturdy in the hand. The front plate, which wraps around the 2.4-inch touchscreen, as well as the removable back plate, are made of a durable, textured plastic that looks like brushed metal. On the bezel, there are two antenna ports—presumably for extending the range of the device—as well as a mini-USB port. There's also a small covered spot for a micro-SIM to support roaming. The device's touchscreen—a relatively new feature for hotspot devices—was bright and responsive. The device is small enough to slip into a pocket or bag and it felt durable enough to withstand a drop or two, although we didn't test this.

Functionality

While the functionality of a small touchscreen on a hotspot is admittedly limited, it does open the device up to all kinds of additional management functions that were very useful. From the touchscreen, I was able to do things like: check how many devices were connected; block devices; monitor devices; set the device to sleep at a certain time. There was also a complete dashboard that can be accessed online, where additional admin controls could be accessed. The many features offered with this device draw a sharp contrast from the early days when a hotspot could connect one device and that was about it. The top of the touchscreen includes a menu of diagnostics similar to that on a smartphone, which includes battery life, type of connection (3G, LTE etc.), strength of signal and whether GPS is enabled.

As far as remaining connected, the Zing did a good job keeping my phone tethered to the network. Rarely did I have to check and ensure that my phone was still connective to the device. In fact, on the couple occasions that I did throw the Zing in my bag and take it home, I forgot to disconnect from teh device and as result remained on Sprint's service even after I had returned home.

Battery life

I was surprised by the removable Li-ion battery (2500 mAh). After connecting off and on for about 8 hours a day for a couple days at a time, leaving it dormant while out of the office, I would say we easily got the advertised 10 hours of usage. While unscientific to be sure, it's certainly an endorsement to say that I wasn't annoyed when I had to plug the device in to recharge.

Conclusion

After using the Zing to support a number of devices (it supports up to 10 devices at once), I have to say that hotspots have come a long way in terms of functionality and user experience since the days of the first screenless 3G hockey pucks. From the device's touchscreen to some pretty impressive device management functions, I was impressed with the Zing, as well as Sprint's accompanying service. It's easy to see where hotspots are headed as the perfect devices for filling in coverage gaps, whether in your employer's Wi-Fi service, or your provider's cell service (granted, to fill your provider's void, you'll probably have to go to another carrier for your hotspot needs).

The ZING is priced at \$49.99 after a \$50 mail-in rebate. While it's a Sprint device, it will support a SIM card for international roaming on GSM networks.

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