Review: Curved Phone Falls Flat, Literally

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SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The Galaxy Round created some buzz in tech circles when Samsung announced it earlier this month, but no one in the downtown Seoul cafe where I played with

the curved screen smartphone asked me about it or even gave a curious glance.

That is likely because the curve is so subtle it is not apparent without a close look.

At first glance, the Galaxy Round appears similar to the Galaxy Note 3 phone, which also has a big display measuring 5.7 inches diagonally. I could see the Round's left and right edges were raised slightly only when viewed from the top or from the bottom.

After handling the device for about 20 minutes, it became clear why Samsung shied away from putting a more dramatic curve in the display.

Reading news articles and Twitter messages made me feel light-headed after just a few minutes, especially with the phone in an upright position. Sentences weren't level and looked skewed, hampering my reading experience.

It's less of a problem, but still one, with the phone placed horizontally.

Perhaps this is an optical distortion that I'd get used to after a while. But given that computer screens, laptops and smartphones are mostly flat, I wouldn't want to constantly switch my eyes back and forth between a curved display and flat screens everywhere else.

Aside from the price tag of more than $1,000, the mobile reading experience was the chief problem I found during my brief hands-on. When watching videos or browsing pictures on the Round, I noticed little difference compared with flat displays.

According to Samsung, curved displays are a step toward mobile devices that are foldable like a map, which explains why the Round generated excitement in tech circles.

It says inflexible curved displays have benefits for users. None of them, however, seem transformative.

Samsung's promotions for the Round say the curve makes it easier to grip the giant phone. But when answering calls, I could barely notice a difference from a flat screen.

Two new features make use of the display's curve only when the Round in screen-off mode is placed on a flat surface, allowing it to be rocked like a cradle. Tilting the device to one side displays its battery status, time, missed calls and unread emails. But to check emails, I had to unlock the Round and go to the home screen.

The second feature is music playback. You can skip to the next song or go back one by tapping the right or left corners of the display. This feature is useless when listening to music on the move.

All this points to the Galaxy Round being an experiment for Samsung and not a product meant to be sold widely.

Like the first generation of the Galaxy Gear, the wristwatch released last month that works in conjunction with some Samsung smartphones to display emails and other information, the Galaxy Round appears built to test its potential.

Samsung can afford to do this because the roaring success of its smartphones has endowed it with cash to burn.

Besides being the world's largest seller of smartphones, Samsung has a business designing and making display screens. It has its own manufacturing plants and engineering staff. It doesn't need to pay another company or hire experts to turn a concept into a product.

For a company that wants to be seen as an innovator rather than a copycat, as Apple Inc. has alleged in multiple lawsuits over phone designs, the Round also sends a message that Samsung is trying to rethink how phones look and feel.

For consumers, there is little reason to pay 1.09 million won ($1,027) for the Galaxy Round. It's available only in South Korea through SK Telecom. The company gives a discounted monthly service rate when the Round is bought along with a two-year contract but it is still the most expensive smartphone in the market.

In South Korea, the same money can buy a Galaxy Note 3, which has similar features and a stylus for note taking on the screen. The Note 3 is just a hair thicker and a tad heavier than the Round, but it also has more battery life.

Samsung said the Round's overseas release schedule is still up in the air.

But that should not matter as I would wait to see the next generation.

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