Review: Sony's Smartwatch Good, but Not Essential

Anick Jesdanun, AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Sony's new SmartWatch 2 doesn't get as much attention — and doesn't do as much — as Samsung's Galaxy Gear computerized wristwatch. But for the things it does, Sony's version performs better.

The SmartWatch 2 is also 33 percent cheaper, at about $200, and works with a variety of Android phones, not just Sony's. Samsung's Galaxy Gear sells for $300 and is compatible only with a handful of high-end Samsung phones.

That said, neither company has made a compelling case of why people need a smartwatch this holiday season.

These wrist-bound gadgets are supposed to free you from constantly pulling out your phone to check for messages. But I found myself checking the watch more often than I would pull out a phone. That proved more distracting — and less private — over dinner, for instance.

The SmartWatch 2 is worth considering primarily if you want to be among the first with the latest technology.

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WHAT SONY'S WATCH DOES:

Think of the watch as a companion to your phone. The phone needs to be within Bluetooth wireless range, or about 30 feet.

You install a free Smart Connect app on the phone to manage what gets sent to the watch, be it messages or call notifications. You give the watch functionality by

adding watch apps to Smart Connect one by one. Smart Connect fetches the watch apps from Google's online Play store.

For example, I installed Sony's Messaging app to get texts on the watch. I get full texts and can reply with emoticons or pre-written responses such as "I'll get back to you." There's no keyboard on the watch to type individual replies, given that its screen measures just 1.6 inches diagonally.

The Facebook watch app lets me check the latest posts and endorse some with "likes" right from the watch. With Twitter, I can read the latest updates, retweet them or mark some as favorites. But I'm limited to text on the watch. I can't access photos and other links that are often embedded into tweets.

Getting too much? Through the phone, I can choose specific friends and accounts to get notifications for, though I can't simply add "family" and other groups I had already created on Facebook.

The watch can act as a remote control for your phone, but calls themselves are made through the phone. For the watch to be useful, you need a Bluetooth wireless headset linked to the phone.

When calls come in, you can reject the call, with or without a canned text reply. If you have a Sony phone, you can answer calls from the watch as well. With any phone running at least Android 4.0, you can initiate calls from the watch using its dialpad or your Android contacts list. But again, the calls go through your phone. You can control volume, but it took me a while to figure out how.

There are nearly 250 other apps you can add, many coming from outside app developers.

I particularly like a 99-cent app called Fake Call. Tap on the watch to make your phone ring with a phantom call. Use that to get you out of whatever sketchy situation you might find yourself in.

A free app called GPS Maps sends a map to your watch with surrounding blocks. The map moves as you move, though I don't get directions.

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HOW IT COMPARES WITH SAMSUNG'S DEVICE:

Samsung's Galaxy Gear wins on style: The watch has a metal frame and straps in six colors. It can work as a fashion accessory, at least for men. It's on the larger side, with a 1.6-inch screen matching Sony's. The SmartWatch 2 from Sony feels

cheap, by comparison, though the straps are replaceable with other 24-millimeter watch straps if you're really buying this for fashion.

The Gear also wins on features: Sony's watch doesn't have a speaker or a microphone. It doesn't have a camera. The Gear has all that, which means you can make phone calls through the watch itself, without a Bluetooth headset. The camera produces low-resolution images, but it beats missing the shot because your phone is in the pocket.

But I don't believe these features are worth an extra $100. The speakerphone doesn't offer much privacy or work well in noisy environments. The speaker allows you to reply to text messages using voice dictation, but the transcriptions are slow and error-prone.

Where the SmartWatch 2 outperforms the Gear is in delivering messages.

The Gear gives you full texts, but that's about it. Get a Facebook or Gmail notification? You have to return to the phone to read the message. The watch is supposed to reduce the need to pull out your phone, but not if you keep getting notifications urging you to check.

And while I got about 2.5 days on the SmartWatch 2 on a single charge, the Gear dies in a day. You can charge Sony's watch with a standard micro-USB charger, while the Gear needs its own. The Gear's watch face also goes dark so it could last just a day. With Sony's watch, you can see the time even in a low-power mode.

Sony's SmartWatch 2 also has many more apps to choose from — more than three times as many.

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DO YOU NEED IT?

Maybe one day, smartwatches will truly be smart. They need to be better at filtering the important notifications from the noise, and they need to do more than tell you to go back to the phone to complete a task.

For now, we're in an era of experimentation. Sony's SmartWatch 2 advances the field with a just-the-basics smartwatch, but I'll wait at least a year or two for even more advances before buying one myself.

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