

# Some Thoughts on Phone Reviewing

Many of you have been following my phone reviews over the years, and you may have noticed that I've been concentrating more and more on the *core functionality* of phones, while concentrating less on features and looks.. But what is this *core functionality* anyway?

All consumer products have a particular function for which they are primarily designed. A car's core function for example is to move you from point A to point B. While it might be interesting that the car comes with heated seats or a kick-ass audio system, these features don't do anything to help the car actually perform its primary duty. Acceleration, braking, tracking, steering response, suspension behavior, etc, all constitute what I would refer to as the *core functionality* of an automobile.

So what is the core function a cell phone? Taken as a group, rather than looking at specific specialty models, the basic function of a cell phone is to allow the user to talk on the phone while mobile. While it might be interesting that a phone has a huge color display or plays video clips, these features don't do anything to help how the phone let's you make and receive calls.

That doesn't mean that peripheral features (such as heated seats in a car, or a big color screen in a cell phone) aren't important to buyers, but to be quite truthful I'm not interested in trying to figure out what my readers want in terms of value-added features. I'll leave that up to them. What does concern me is how well a particular model performs its day-to-day chore *as a phone*.

Core functionality of a phone therefore falls into 3 general categories:

- 1) its RF (Radio Frequency Capabilities), which define the manner in which the device picks up and deals with the signal;
- 2) its audio capabilities, which define how good the phone sounds, and how easy it is to hear in a noisy environment; and
- 3) its direct support features, such as the ringer volume and the overall ergonomics of the phone's design.

Within each of these general categories are more specific sub-categories. When we talk about the RF capabilities of a phone, we are looking at two distinctly different aspects. The first is RF sensitivity, which defines how well the phone can receive a signal as it becomes increasingly weak. A phone with excellent RF sensitivity can pick up a signal in places that a phone with poor RF sensitivity cannot. The second aspect is over-the-road performance, which defines the manner in which the phone deals with the trials and

tribulations of real-world RF. A phone with poor over-the-road performance will sound marked worse on-the-move than a phone with excellent over-the-road performance.

When it comes to audio capabilities, we are concerned with both the incoming audio (what you hear in the earpiece) and outgoing audio (what your callers hear at their end). Audio generally breaks down into 4 sub-categories. The first is tonal balance, which refers to how balanced the sound is (just the right amount of bass, midrange, and highs). The second aspect is sound reproduction, which defines how well the phone reconstructs the audio sent to it (or from it). The third category is audio volume, which defines how loud the earpiece can get, and how much *overhead* the phone provides to turn up faint callers. The fourth aspect is the ability of the phone to deal with background noise, though this usually applies strictly to outgoing audio.

Support features are defined as those things that are required to let the phone perform its primary task. These include ringer volume, keypad layout, keypad quality, screen visibility, and other general ergonomic concerns that would directly affect the use of the device for making or receiving phone calls.

Other features, such as cameras, video playback capabilities, games, and sundry convenience features (such as alarms, calendars, and voice recorders) will no longer be discussed in any reviews appearing on this web page after 21-Dec-2004. People have long been reading my reviews *because of* the strong bias toward core functionality, and I'm hoping that by concentrating solely upon these things I'll be able to write more focused reviews.

Some people have made a valid point that data capabilities are essentially a core function of modern cell phones too. However, I haven't really noticed that this differs much from one phone to another. The only real differences here are the availability of convenience features such as Bluetooth or infrared connections. When it comes to the data performance of the phone, that seems to be strictly a function of the provider and not the phone. There isn't really much I can truly test concerning data functionality, and this is not included in the review.

There is one issue that should be addressed immediately, and that's the fact that phones tend to vary from one example to another. It never ceases to amaze me how much difference there is between an excellent copy of a particular phone, and a poor copy of the same phone. The problem with reviewing them is that I can never really know which end of that spectrum I am looking at. Ideally I would like to simultaneously test 4 or 5 copies of the same phone, but that simply isn't realistic. I don't believe this necessarily *voids* any comments made about the test phone, but readers should at least keep it in mind.