

Personal Tech

PHONE SMART

In Choosing a New Phone, Online Research Goes Only So Far

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Published: October 7, 2009

Buying a new cellphone is about as much fun as buying a used car.

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George Frey/Bloomberg News

Phones from AT&T on display at a Best Buy store. The retail outlets operated by the carriers generally offer a wider choice than do the mass merchants.

A device can have vastly different prices depending who is selling it, and since retailers offer a limited selection of phones, it's hard to trust a salesperson who recommends a certain device, especially when carriers introduce new handsets weekly.

It's getting worse. Carriers seem to believe that everyone wants a shiny new phone for a holiday gift, so new devices are now surging into the market.

There is a way to approach the task with a small measure of logic. To boil it down, the process is a three-step boogie: go online to narrow your choices, go offline to test a few, go back online to buy one. Spend a day doing this, and you can avoid two years of cellphone remorse.

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STEP 1: LOG ON Several weeks ago, a friend asked me to recommend a [Verizon](#) smartphone. The BlackBerry Tour was new, so I suggested he at least take a look at that. Mistaking my suggestion for an endorsement, he bought one the next day, and quickly found the keyboard was far too cramped for his fingers.

Had my friend read a couple of online reviews of the Tour, he might have chosen more carefully.

If he had another shot, I'd suggest he start by spending five minutes on sites like [GotReception.com](#), [DeadCellZones.com](#) and [CellReception.com](#) to check the coverage of the major carriers in his area. These sites aren't completely reliable, because they can have limited, or old, data on certain towns, but they can help narrow your list of carriers.

Next, check [LetsTalk.com](#) or [AmazonWireless.com](#), an [Amazon](#) spinoff. These sites have a handy selection feature that helps you winnow your device choices, depending on whether you prefer a full keyboard, GPS, Wi-Fi and the like. (To find it on AmazonWireless.com, look for the "See all phones" link on the home page.)

Neither site asks you how important it may be to customize your phone. Assuming that's important to you, consider whether the phone has a good app store.

You know about iPhones, but BlackBerrys and Android phones like the myTouch 3G from T-Mobile also have good app stores. (Android isn't a manufacturer; it's the brand of software that runs the phone, just as Windows runs a computer.)

Speaking of that, on Monday Windows Mobile introduced an app store, Windows Marketplace for Mobile, with apps for phones that run the new version of its operating system. Apps for Symbian phones from [Nokia](#) and WebOS phones from [Palm](#) are in shorter supply, but there are more each week.

Remember that app stores are useful only for smartphones, not the old-fashioned flip phones that aren't meant to surf the Web or speak directions to you on a drive across town.

Finally, to eliminate possible clunkers from your list, click over to [CNet.com](#), LetsTalk or [PhoneDog.com](#) for professional reviews, and check AmazonWireless or [HowardForums.com](#) for user reviews.

STEP 2: HIT THE ROAD Armed with a list of two or three phones, head to a local retailer to test them. Bear in mind that carrier-specific stores stock more phone models than mass-market retailers like [Best Buy](#), [Wal-Mart](#) or Radio Shack.

Take the phone in hand and compose an e-mail message or a text on it. Imagine doing it hundreds of times. Take a picture. See how easy or difficult it is to call up your favorite Web page. If something initially annoys you, it will drive you to distraction over time.

Navigate around a page and try to enlarge the type for easier reading. I've been shocked to find some high-end smartphones, like the Nokia N97 and the BlackBerry Storm, that are surprisingly weak at Web surfing.

Finally, note the prices of these phones, then head home.

STEP 3: LOG ON AGAIN By now, you will probably have decided which phone you want. If it's an [iPhone](#), and you're willing to buy a refurbished device, check [AT&T's](#) Web site, where you sometimes find deep discounts.

If it's another device, a visit to several retail sites will usually yield the best price. Start with online retailers, which can charge lower prices because they have lower operating costs than physical retailers.

Wirefly, LetsTalk and AmazonWireless are your best bets here. AmazonWireless is still in testing mode, and [Sprint](#) phones are not yet available there.

Just about any retailer will accept a returned phone within 30 days and let you escape your carrier contract without an early termination fee. After that, it gets dicey.

Amazon will refuse to accept a returned phone. And if you cut off service or switch to a cheaper plan within the first 181 days, it will charge you up to \$250, on top of whatever early termination fees you face from the carrier. [Walmart.com](#) and Wirefly will charge similar fees if you end your contract early, so ask about that before you buy anywhere online, then decide if it's worth the risk.

The Web sites of major retailers can offer good prices, too. Walmart.com last week sold the Palm Pre for \$99, after a \$50 mail-in rebate, which was \$50 less than on [Sprint.com](#). Wirefly and [Amazon.com](#) matched the \$99 price, and neither site puts you through the hassle of mail-in rebates.

Another caveat: if you have any anxiety about transporting your contacts from your old phone to your new one, setting up an e-mail account or connecting a Bluetooth headset, you might consider buying directly from a store.

Sales representatives in Radio Shack, Wal-Mart and other retailers are not required to help you do this, but if you find the right associate at the right time, you might be rolling with the device before you leave the store.

Best Buy Mobile's employees are required to offer this service, through its Walk Out Working policy. Likewise, the carrier-specific stores pride themselves on prepping your new phone — most notably, Sprint, which last year introduced its Ready Now service.

Let's face it: if you don't know how to do these things yourself, it'll cost you hours of research and stumbling around the controls to get it done.

Your time is probably worth more than the \$50 you will have saved, to say nothing of the frustration you'll endure — or the possibility that you'll just give up and completely avoid e-mail, Bluetooth headsets, Wi-Fi and everything else that made that shiny new smartphone so enticing in the first place.