

BlackBerry Storm has some kinks to work out

To paraphrase George Orwell: "Physical keyboard good! Virtual keyboard bad!"

That's the common refrain from many BlackBerry devotees ever since Cupertino, Calif.'s Apple Inc. announced the iPhone two years ago. Now, smartphone buyers have another choice: the BlackBerry Storm, the first-ever touch-screen device from Waterloo, Ont.-based Research in Motion (RIM). The response to the Storm has been tepid so far and RIM recently announced that a second version is set to be released this fall.

In the first version of the Storm, RIM did away with both the physical keyboard and the trackball. Instead, one large screen that reacts to the touch of a finger dominates the device's face. Swipe text, web pages and the like to scroll and pan. Press the screen and it clicks like the buttons below the trackpad on a notebook computer. Tilt the phone on its side and certain applications change orientation.

For all these changes, the Storm works much like any other modern BlackBerry, so current BlackBerry users can expect a gentle learning curve.

On the phone, numbers are large, easy to press and the features are plainly set forth. I did have two surprises: once the caller's voice abruptly disappeared; another time the speakerphone came on. From what I can tell, I clicked the screen each time using my cheekbone.

E-mail is what one expects from a BlackBerry, with one key difference: the Storm displays a SureType keyboard (two letters on most keys) when held upright and a full keyboard when held on its side.

The full keyboard proved frustrating. My thumbs hid the keys they touched, and the resulting illumination, so accuracy suffered. Given my penchant for strong passwords, this was mildly annoying. I preferred the SureType keyboard. I used it to type e-mail, web addresses and less common words (like my own name) quickly and accurately. Surprisingly, when typing passwords on mail.google.com, the SureType layout switched to an ordinary cellphone's number pad layout.

The Storm is a serviceable device, one RIM needs in its lineup. Having said that, the Storm compares unfavourably in too many ways to the iPhone for RIM to leave it in its current incarnation for long.

When using the two devices side by side, it feels as though Apple rethought the smartphone around the touch screen while RIM was constrained by the need to make the Storm familiar to current customers. Little things like setting time on the Storm are less intuitive and trickier. The web browser does not show web pages as clearly and its zoom tools pale in comparison to the iPhone's "automatic zoom" trick or the intuitive "pinch in/pinch out" zooming,

both of which make reading from a small screen much easier.

On the hardware side, the Storm's lack of Wi-Fi means web surfing always happens at glacial cellular speeds. Its display does not switch orientation as quickly or smoothly when you rotate the device, and processing lags in other ways.

Yet hardware comparisons, like the Storm's better camera or availability on more networks, skirt RIM's bigger challenge. Consider: certain web sites like www.thestar.com offer easily accessible iPhone-friendly pages but not BlackBerry-friendly ones. That's strange, since BlackBerrys had browsers years before the iPhone saw the light of day.

Also, as Apple.com announced in January on its iPhone page, 15,000 legitimate applications from third-party software developers are available for the iPhone via its iTunes App Store. That's an astounding number, given Apple has only permitted third-party applications since July 2008.

Admittedly, many of these applications are frivolous, but the iPhone developer list boasts names like Salesforce.com, Cisco (WebEx), IBM (Lotus iNotes), the American Bar Association (ABA Journal), LinkedIn and the *New York Times*.

Is this frantic pace of third-party development the canary in RIM's coal mine? After all, the BlackBerry is the most trusted phone/e-mail business handheld. Other software developers make applications for it.

But professional productivity means more than phone calls and e-mail, and downtime means more than a game of BrickBreaker. Updating practice management systems, performing research and playing a great game? All three activities are possible, or nearly so, on today's smartphones — BlackBerry, iPhone, Windows Mobile, Palm, Symbian and Google Android.

And each platform, including RIM, is chasing Apple by juicing its developer community and building their own application stores. Driving these efforts is a commonly accepted history lesson: the computing platform with the most killer apps dominates its market.

(Of course, BlackBerrys used only for calling and e-mailing will continue to serve their owners just as well as WordPerfect does in a Word-dominated business computing world, and there's nothing wrong with that.)

Given its lead in the business market, RIM can temporarily afford to market its relatively unpolished Storm and put up with the relative lack of public awareness of third-party BlackBerry apps. But strong competitors are nipping at its heels. I, for one, expect much more innovation out of Waterloo — and soon. And one day, maybe, legions of thumb typists will bleat: "Physical keyboard good! Virtual keyboard better!" ■

HI-TECH



LUIGI BENETTON

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