

TECH NEWS

The first Palm-Microsoft smart phone debuts

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By Gary Krakow

Few industry experts ever expected a Palm smart phone that ran on Microsoft software. Palm devices ran on the Palm operating system and competed with gadgets based on Microsoft's technology. But for the past few months the two companies have been working on a Treo that uses the latest Windows Mobile software.

On Wednesday, they unveiled it. The Treo 700w offers a bit of the best of both worlds, with Palm adding some nice usability touches to the Microsoft OS. The phone is available exclusively (for now) from Verizon Wireless, and it is the first Treo to use Verizon's high-speed, wireless broadband EV-DO network.

Fans of the Palm OS shouldn't panic – the Treo line will continue to have Palm-based phones. The new 700w is more aimed at placating those IT managers who cry "unclean" at the notion of connecting a non-Windows device to the corporate network. If you've got one of those where you work, you should take a look at the 700w. However, if what really caught your eye was that thing about wireless broadband, you have more options (more about that below).

If you own or have ever used a Treo smart phone the 700w's size and shape will be very familiar. And if you've ever used a Windows Mobile smart phone mastering the 700w will be a breeze.

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For those who go by the numbers the 700w is a dual-band CDMA, EV-DO cell phone handset (800MHz for voice and 1900MHz for data) and is backwards compatible with the 1xRTT data standard. The phone runs the Windows Mobile 5.0.2.0 Pocket PC Phone Edition, with an Intel 312MHz XScale processor inside it. The 700w comes with 128MB of memory, 60MB of which is dedicated for user memory. As for size, it measures 5.1 by 2.3 by 0.9 inches and weighs in at 6.4 ounces.

Features include a 1.3 mega pixel camera (with zoom and video features), Bluetooth 1.2 connectivity, a MultiMedia card-SD/SDIO expansion slot, a 240 by 240 pixel color screen, and removable lithium-ion battery good for as much as 4.7 hours per charge. The specs say it takes only three hours to fully charge the battery from empty, and that's about what I found. Battery recharging in general was speedy.

In addition to all the features that Microsoft includes in their latest version of the OS, Palm has added a lot more usability. The big difference is the main screen, which Palm has reconfigured to their standards. They've added a number of clever features including the ability to start typing a contact name and have the phone search for the number. When it is found all you have to do is press one button to dial it.

There are two programmable soft buttons on the front screen, the idea being that you use one for voicemail and the other to connect you to a 411 directory. But you can program them for anything you like. There is also a search feature on the front screen to help guide you to any of the device's features.

Palm has also added some nice touches such as the ability to make three calls at the same time, soft keys to help deal with Outlook e-mail, the ability to add photos to each speed dial number, video and MIDI ring tones and even the chance to send a quick text message apology to someone calling you at a time when you're too busy to actually talk to them.

While it takes a while to get used to all these features, setting up the phone and e-mail configuration went very smoothly. Overall, Palm did a very good job of mixing the best of a Treo phone and Microsoft's smart phone operating system.

Verizon has exclusive rights to sell the 700 for the next few months – and expect to pay to be the first on your block to own one. The 700w will sell for \$399.99 when you commit to a two-year service plan. In addition to whichever voice calling plan you choose, expect to pay an additional \$45 per month for the EV-DO data service.

High-speed EV-DO data connectivity is available in many large cities across the U.S. That's a good thing. But when EV-DO is not available, the 700w reverts back to the slower 1X data network. You do not want to spend much time waiting for the network to handle your e-mail or Web browsing requests. Make sure EV-DO service is available – or that it will be available – in your operating area.

Other EV-DO phones

If you're not moved by the historic togetherness of Palm and Microsoft, but have been waiting eagerly for an EV-DO phone, a new handset from UT Starcom is worth taking a look at. It comes in two versions, one for Sprint, where it's known as the PPC-6700, and one for Verizon, where it's called the XV6700.

I was able to compare the Sprint version with the new Treo 700w. Both have relatively similar specs when it comes to size and weight. UT Starcom's phone also runs on Windows Mobile 5.0, but doesn't have all the bells and whistles added by Palm.

On the other hand, the Sprint phone has a larger (2.88 inch diagonal) color screen, a larger, easier to use slide-out keyboard (the Palm's keys are very closely spaced), Wi-Fi connectivity and the ability to use the phone as a high-speed modem for your PC.

The Sprint version of the phone, which has been available since the fall, sports a heftier price tag than the Treo 700w: \$449.99 with a two-year service plan, or \$599.99 without one. On Wednesday, Verizon announced that its version of the phone will be available starting Jan. 19, for \$299.99 with a two-year plan. As with the Treo 700w, don't forget to add in the cost of monthly data service.

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