

Virgin Mobile's Switch Back Phone

The shape and functionality of the cellular dream machine could be altered by Apple's release of their new iPhone. If the iPhone, which replaces all phone buttons with an interactive touch screen, proves to be as trend setting as the company's iPod I expect that the cell phone with small buttons will eventually become a thing of the past. Until one can separate iPhone hype from the phone's performance, button controlled phones are certainly going to remain with us for the foreseeable future.

At a CES pre-conference press event I was impressed with the apparent functionality and beauty of a new digital phone manufactured by Kyocera for Virgin Mobile. In its closed position the Switch Back phone is a standard bar phone. However when you flip it open you find a second larger screen and a full QWERTY keyboard that is perfect for text messaging. The phone has been designed to merge cellular voice communication, text messaging, AOL instant messaging, picture messaging with its built in flash camera, email communication, and mobile web browsing into one small communications device. Did I forget to mention that this phone retails for only \$99.99 and is also a speakerphone, with voice

dialing, and voice answering? For a full list of the Switch Back's features you should check out www.virginmobileusa.com/phones/.



I did find two phone characteristics that weren't pleasing. After about two minutes of inactivity the phone screen goes completely blank so its standby mode looks the same as if the phone is turned off. The buttons are very small and the number layout in



the phone's closed position is skewed. This layout makes it difficult to dial a number because the numbers don't follow the pattern found on old landline pushbutton phones.

Switch Back is a Virgin Mobile phone that will only work with VM's service which is provided over Sprint's cellular network. Virgin Mobile is best known as a pre-paid cellular phone provider even though they

do offer other phone use plans. On their pay by the minute plan you can use locally purchased Top-Up cards to add minutes to your phone. You can enter the number found on these cards on their website or directly from your phone. When your minutes run out your cell phone stops receiving or making calls. Except for the cost per call this might be an interesting way of introducing a child to their first cellular phone.

As long as you top up once every ninety days the phone will be returned to service. If ninety days pass without adding a 20.00 dollar top up to the phone the clock will start ticking toward your eventual removal from the service. The website indicates you have 60 days before termination. My contact for the company indicates that you won't lose your cell phone number for these extra sixty days and they will keep emailing you to remind you that your total service might soon be terminated. If you miss this 150 day window you would have to start the activation process all over again and you would end up with a new phone number.

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