

## Why Do You Need the Fanciest Cell Phone?

Listening to a friend's lament about the loss of her \$1,500 iPhone 11 Max Super-duper Pro Elite whatever not two months after a thief had plucked its predecessor from her purse, I wondered what the super-deluxe cell phones really do that a mid-range model won't, except maybe for including better camera.

It's not like anyone really notices, like they might a Rolex, a nice car, a Gucci purse, or even a souped-up laptop.

And what do most of us really need a better camera for anyway? That reminded me of a lawyer who was really, really struggling in his practice, always late on his apartment rent, barely able to afford anything, and who insisted that he needed the latest cell phone because it offered up a better camera. He was a lawyer, not a photographer, and all he was likely to do with that camera was photograph lunch.

Is there some sweet spot for cell phones beyond which everything else is just hype?

---

The big one is the camera. Any camera you have in your pocket will always take better pictures than the camera you left at home. As a parent, I have many great pictures of my kids which wouldn't otherwise exist, because I don't walk around with my DSLR. I used to own a video camera (not anymore!) Etc.

Beyond that it's mostly media, I think. If you play phone games or watch a ton of phone videos (I don't) that would probably matter to you.

That said, if you choose carefully, modern phones can have the best battery life; my XR is amazing in that regard.

Erik Hammarlund, Massachusetts

---

Good question; I'd like to know also. Until recently, I had an iPhone4s.

When it took on the characteristics of a paperweight, I bought an 8. Besides liking the economies of staying a little bit behind the curve, I think the cellphone is a pestilence (so I really don't care about it). I used to buy the phones outright for a discount but I have a 30-month, \$15 payment plan on this one.

Then I looked at my bill and saw a \$15/month insurance charge. Called up AT&T and inquired about deductible: \$300! So, I cancelled the insurance and I'm taking my chances on this one lasting many years.

John Leonard, Connecticut

---

The only phones I've seen approach 1500 (and I don't use an iPhone so I don't look at them) are ones that have 5g capability. That seems to tack on at least \$200 just to have the 5g radio. It isn't worth it if you don't live somewhere with 5g and 5g has a shorter range than LTE does, so you need to be somewhere with really good 5 g coverage (which is almost nowhere right now) before that makes any sense financially. I did spend nearly \$1k for my most recent phone, and mostly I paid full price because the only deals I could find either require trading in a phone (which I'm not comfortable doing, no matter how many thousands of overwrites I might do on my phone to effectively erase the data) or to activate a new line, which is a waste of time and money when I don't need a new line. It is possible to get the phone cheaper if you are going to trade in a phone (like usually at least \$300 cheaper if not \$500, depending on the deal) but you have to be comfortable with doing it. As far as why I'd spend that much on a phone?

To get the specs I want that will last me long enough to not need to get another phone any time soon.

Lesley A. Hoenig, Michigan

---

My cell phone is a circa 2012 model which I've had for three years and which cost \$20 new. The cell provider recently warned me that it's 3G and won't work properly on their new network this year, so I may have to spend an additional \$20 to get a newer model. (I buy 400 minutes every three months for \$25.) It's usually charged up but turned off; occasionally I turn it on when I'm driving since it connects to Bluetooth in the car. Most of the time I have calls forwarded from the cell number to Google Voice, which sends me an email with a sound file and machine transcription of the message if I don't pick up, or I can pick up the call on my 12.9-inch iPad Pro (which I use for everything including taking photos and writing and reading and listening to music and telephone calls, because it's in wireless range 95% of the time, and I can use Google Voice or Facetime).

I far prefer the iPad Pro to squinting at a little phone screen. And I never use it while I'm walking.

L. Maxwell Taylor, Vermont

---

I suppose it depends on how you define "need". Cellphones are very useful and better cameras, faster processor times, and increased storage improve their utility. I use my cellphone far more than I do my computer. As far as impressing others, I rarely care what others think enough to be concerned with their impressions. I wear Lucchese boots because of the quality; few people can recognize them anyway. Don't have a Rolex, although I do like some models; I have an Omega and a Bulova Precisionist which work very well for me, but aren't particularly recognizable.

I use an iPhone almost exclusively for emails, taking photos of documents and convert them to PDF rather than photocopying them, review client files on my computer using Sugarsync and occasionally email those documents, receiving faxes, keeping my calendar updated, using browser to bring up statutes or case law, check Apple weather app, play Scrabble with my wife, and least important; monitor this list. That said, I use an iPhone 7 but intend to upgrade to at least an iPhone 11 next year when the new models come out.

Duke Drouillard, Nebraska

---

Nobody "needs" a \$1500 phone, or to spend \$249 on Air pods---for those who wish to make a statement of some type (and continue helping the world's wealthiest corporation get even richer), god bless ya:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/technology/apple-iphone-sales-earnings.html>

Plenty of phones with wonderful cameras in the \$500 (and less) range:

<https://thewirecutter.com/reviews/best-android-phone/>

Dave Rakowski, Pennsylvania

---

I bought the iPhone X the minute it came out (in late 2017) and have been extremely pleased with it. The overall performance is great and I find FaceID to be a big upgrade over Touch ID. That said, I still have the same phone. I may upgrade later this year, or I may not, but I will have gotten at least 3 years of use out of this phone even if I do upgrade this year.

I am a technology fan and I use my phone heavily for everything from writing to reading to watching vids to listening to books (I love Voice Dream Reader and Audible) to accessing my Macs remotely (via Splashtop). So my phone use is very very high and it is worth it to me have a nicer experience, and having a recently updated processor/RAM/screen are all things that can help the experience. But even for my use and preferences, if I buy the top model right when it comes out, it can last a while. I also have an Apple Watch, which is even more optional than my phone. Definitely not a need. It's nice though. I like it.

Incidentally I have an add on to my renters insurance that separately covers my portable electronics should they be stolen or mysteriously disappear. And AppleCare+ also covers theft. So there are ways to protect against the situation that happened to your friend. Anyone who can't easily self-insure the loss of their phone should look into that.

Justin Mallone

---

This seems backward to me. Those who buy top-end phones for appearances subsidize those who get them for function. You get the world's knowledge in the palm of your hand, a decent communication device, and a powerful video and still camera. And it works pretty well. An amazing value compared to a gold-wrapped Swatch.

Jeffrey Burack

---

I'm kind of skeptical of the very high end cell phones, some of it is a status symbol. But I don't live on my cellphone either; I've still got landline at house and office and nearly all of my internet stuff is either done on a desktop (here at office) or an iPad at home (I do have relatively high end iPad Pro; which replace my old iPad with

Retina but I'd also had that for probably 7 years or so). I intend to keep the iPad pro for similar length of time.

As far as the phones go, i used to be on Tracfone, which was cheap, less than \$100 per year but only used it for 'emergencies and urgencies". I had Nokia which was great; long battery life, good signal, easy to use; alas it literally disintegrated after about 10 years, the buttons eventually started turning to powder in my hands. Might of had to do with in the car in Florida in the heat. Then I replaced it with some other Tracfone, running on android; the problem with it was it wasn't real reliable; bad signal, not real clear; I realized it was a problem when I was in a mediation in Orlando and had to call my client in California; I could barely get a signal, right in downtown Orlando; at which point I figured I needed a decent cellphone with good coverage.

So, I went to Virgin mobile, bought a refurb iPhone 4S for like \$200; it was already 'older' but it worked; plus it ran whatever apps I had thru my iPad. I didn't want to spend several hundred on the latest and greatest it was adequate; good coverage, good signal, clear to speak into and to hear. I kept that for several years and replaced it with a 'refurb' 5S which is my current phone, which is getting a bit long in the tooth; it works but they're not updating the IOS at this point. I'm hanging on to it until apple comes out with their SE2, supposedly in the spring; price is supposed to be either \$300 or \$400, which seems reasonable to me, and will be up to date with architecture and IOS system. I'm not springing for the 10, or 11 or whatever the top of the line is now. I can wait and will until they come out with a bit of a budget model.

Ronald A Jones, Florida

---

I get that the camera you got with you beats the camera you got at home (sort of like a gun; the gun you got in your pocket beats the gun in your cabinet when you need it)(hrmph).

And there have been improvements in cameras; but at this point they're sort of incremental. A 12 MP camera is not 50% better resolution than a 8 MP camera; in order to double resolution you have to quadruple the megapixels, i.e, a 32 MP camera will have twice the resolution of an 8 MP camera. See for explanation.

<https://photographylife.com/camera-resolution-explained>

<https://www.kenrockwell.com/tech/mpmyth.htm>[\[https://www.kenrockwell.com/tech/mpmyth.htm\]](https://www.kenrockwell.com/tech/mpmyth.htm)

Nonetheless, higher end phones may have better, or more, lenses.

Ronald A Jones

---

With the exception of certain designer and "luxury phones," like the \$4,000 gold smart phone that HTC made for a while, there are usually real differences between various models that can justify at much of the price difference. More memory and faster processors will allow you to use the phone longer before upgrading, etc. Whether it makes sense for someone to spend that extra money will obviously depend on their circumstances.

I'm currently using a Pixel 3a because, when I bought it, it did everything I need and is likely to receive operating system upgrades for a relatively long period. Since then I've found that I'll get a lot of value out of a dual SIM phone and I'll spend more to get that feature when I eventually upgrade.

A friend who teaches high school mentioned that kids use phone brands as a reason to bully each other. That's not really relevant for this discussion as I think the point holds for most adults, I only mention it because it was a good reminder that I am extremely glad that my teenage years are well behind me.

Noel French, Michigan

---

I don't care much about status symbols. I am willing, however, to invest more money in something that I will use every day, or which is important to my practice. I have a last-generation iPhone (XS Max, I believe) and last year's Apple watch, because I use them all the time for both work and exercise. I run several ultramarathons a year, and the improvements in both GPS and battery life are important to me. For example, my iPhone 5 wouldn't make it through a three-hour run using both the GPS and music. By contrast, last fall I ran a 13-hour race with my current phone and watch and didn't need to charge either of them until I got home (and neither were in danger of dying on me when I got home).

Kevin Grierson, Virginia

---

Great example Kevin...it's something that you need and use.

This conversation reminds me of people who buy trucks and 4x4's----some need them, the rest are just making a statement.

Dave Rakowski

---

I am extremely happy with my LG G7. Life is good and we got a great deal at T-mobile with buy one and get one free. \$650 for 2 great phone for me and my wife. I don't imagine paying close to \$1500 for a single phone at all. I think LG is always under the radar due to iPhone and Samsung domination of the market.

John Kang, Nevada

---

Everyone has to analyze their use. Personally, I get a most current version phone when the one I own starts having problems, being difficult to update, or has battery issues. In practice, that means I skip multiple generations. I had an iPhone 6, then moved to iPhone X and should be good for at least a couple of years more.

Some people trade phones annually, just like some people trade vehicles annually. It is a choice.

I do try to pay careful attention to the reception quality on any phone. Cell phone reception in rural counties of Texas is not optimum. I worry about that more than getting a connection generally in a major city (probably because less populous areas is the only time I have trouble). AT&T has legacy towers, which in some rural areas may be all that is available. That availability has been important in my choices, but if you never get off the freeways and major towns, you probably don't care.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

---

Mid-line phones exist and continue to sell. Some phones cater to that market. It is what I look for getting phones for the generation above me.

<https://www.wired.com/story/best-cheap-phones/>

The above is a link to a December analysis of moderately priced phones. It comports with what I would look at in the market today, were I shopping.

Darrell G. Stewart

---

People do actually notice this stuff! I'm an old fuddyduddy when it comes to cell phones, but I have family members and friends who love to get the newest and greatest. They notice when others have the same one and lament when they can't justify upgrading yet. I imagine it's like noticing the red sole on someone's black pumps - if you know what it means, it means something. To everyone else, you probably just see a pair of shoes. For the record, I'm oblivious to most of this stuff, but I have started learning purse designers so I can remind my clients to list and value them in their schedules.

Corrine Bielejeski, California

---

I know some folks who just swap back and forth between Verizon and AT&T every 2.5 years or so. Since they're a couple, they can get the 2-for-1 deals so they functionally only pay half price. Two to three years seems like a decent compromise. I think that last year they negotiated a "please don't leave us" bonus which was even better than the 2-for-1.

Erik Hammarlund

"Cell phone reception in rural counties of Texas is not optimum. I worry about that more than getting a connection generally in a major city (probably because less populous areas is the only time I have trouble). AT&T has legacy towers, which in some rural areas may be all that is available. That availability has been important in my choices, but if you never get off the freeways and major towns, you probably don't care."

Funny you should mention that....

I'm always amused by the cell phone advertising that claims that the XYZ phone company provides service to \_\_\_% of the country (or \_\_\_% of the population, or whatever). Why should I care if your network has better service in East Nowhere, if I never go to East Nowhere? What I care about is who has the best service around my home and my office (where I spend close to 90% of my time). Similarly, when I go camping with my son, I don't really care whether your network doesn't get service out there in the middle of nowhere—because no other network does, either.

Perhaps if I was a “road warrior,” I’d care about that stuff, but it doesn’t make an appreciable difference in my life.

Brian H. Cole, California

---

Nothing could get me to switch to ATT

Lesley Hoenig

---

My last upgrade was from a Galaxy S3. to an S-7. I'm sure the cameras have improved, =However, unless you take a lot of pictures the software sucks. Maybe when I retire I'll find better software..

Personally the latest and greatest isn't that much greater.

John Davidson, Pennsylvania

---

I literally run my office from my phone so I really do need a top of the line phone. My current phone is a Galaxy Note 9 which I paid well over a thousand dollars for. Not one person has been impressed by my phone since Samsung phones all pretty much look alike. No one has even noticed it's a (once) expensive Note 9 (maybe because its price has dropped so much since it's no longer the latest and greatest). But that's not why I bought it.

This is the first phone I've ever had that has not caused me to curse in frustration because of chugging or lag. The camera comes in handy for photographing signed documents or evidence, but I'm no photographer so I'm not all that big on the camera.

Eugene Lee, California

---

I don't know that any particular phone serves as a status symbol any more, at least not to adults. Phones look so similar from generation to generation now that somebody would have to pay a LOT of attention to what particular model you are using to figure out what it is. I'd bet that folks who want the latest and greatest regardless of functionality are probably just folks who enjoy being on the bleeding edge of tech for its own sake, rather than for showing off. And some people really do want the functionality. I got a new Apple Watch when the 4 came out not because the version I had (a 2) was faulty in some way but because the 4 was larger and easier to read without reading glasses.

Kevin Grierson

---

I too choose a good phone because I run my practice from it about half the time. I have a Pixel 3 and also had the original Pixel. The memory, speed and battery life make it worth it to me.

Suzanne L. Hawkins

---

Why? I had to leave T-Mobile and go to ATT. I had horrible phone reception. It's cost more, but its worth it.

Sonya Armfield

---

A. ATT reception here is not great. When Verizon took over Alltel, they were forcing all Verizon customers here to switch to att. Instead I cancelled (because we had that option. I did have to give up my previous cell number to do it) got a PO box in Midland MI and got a new Verizon account. Verizon's reception here is great. I wouldn't get T-Mobile or Sprint either.

B. I had ATT wireless during law school and was roaming in my own apartment and they wouldn't let me have a national plan (I switched to Verizon which did let me have a national plan). I have been given no reason to think ATT has gotten less horrible.

Verizon, while not perfect has never treated me the way ATT has.

Lesley Hoenig

---

Phones may look similar. But the case on mine draws lots of comments.

[https://www.redbubble.com/people/ricerocca/works/29571974-no-consent-for-search-eff?p=iphone-case&phone\\_model=iphone\\_xs&cover\\_type=tough&type=iphone\\_xs\\_tough](https://www.redbubble.com/people/ricerocca/works/29571974-no-consent-for-search-eff?p=iphone-case&phone_model=iphone_xs&cover_type=tough&type=iphone_xs_tough)  
or [rdbl.co/2vBbVhh](https://rdbl.co/2vBbVhh)

'-)

James S. Tyre, California

---

That site only seems to have cases for iPhone and Samsung phones. That is rather unfortunate.

Lesley A. Hoenig

---

FWIW, I periodically look at buying a satellite phone to more permanently address this issue. To date, I have not done so, but I think seriously about it when I know I am going to be spending any significant time in rural/remote areas.

Darrell G. Stewart

---

I've got zero patience when it comes to anything related to computing. I don't change phones every year, but eventually smart phones get really slow. Especially when Apple updates iOS over and over again. Then your phone doesn't get the latest updates, and then stuff stops working.

When I upgrade, it's to the fastest chip, because the older processors do end up feeling less snappy.

Joseph D. Dang, California

---

I keep my phones for a few years and right now I still have an iPhone 6s.

I am considering getting a certified refurbished XS or a new 11 (not the Pro) from the Apple Store. Veterans get 10% discount. I need a bigger screen for my not so young eyes and I want a faster processor. My wife got the latest 11Pro and it is fast.

Dennis Chen

---

I'm with Dennis, I'm still rocking my iPhone 6s from years ago. I have generally noticed that when your cell phone contract is about to expire (which mine is) they'll either give you a nice upgrade for free or greatly reduced price, which is what I've been doing since I've had a smartphone.

I \*have\* actually had several lawyers make a comment/mock my "old phone" at networking events though, so perhaps the fear of it reflecting poorly on you has some validity, heh. I also drive a 10+ year old vehicle (that's totally paid off and in great condition) so I'm not really banking on the "impress everyone with my displays of opulence" strategy anyway. Opulence...I don't have it  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkB9OT2XVvA>>.

Bryce Davis

---

Verizon did away with contracts a few years ago. No more new every two discounts. Sprint leases phones, which just seems ridiculous

Lesley A. Hoenig

Last year we switched from Sprint to AT&T without getting new phones. Our existing phones worked fine going from Sprint's CDMA to AT&T's system. I did not want a contract or any obligation so we did not upgrade any of the phones. I am much happier with AT&T. I get a big discount as a veteran.

I think it is 25% off the base fee.

Dennis Chen

---

Perry Mason had a car phone.

Roger M. Rosen, California

---

I get my iPhone direct from Apple, that way I don't play games with my carrier about my rates. Apple will let you pay for your phone over two years with zero interest. You can also trade in your phone after a year to get the latest and greatest, or keep it for two years, and either stop making payments or just keep it and hand it off to someone else when you get a new one.

Kevin Grierson