The Pixel 5 and 4A 5G play it safe



Google's fall hardware presentation was a slickly-produced 30-minute affair with four products, as expected. You can experience it with our liveblog here or catch up on the biggest announcements here. Outside of some very neat software tricks, there were no big surprises.

But it turns out that we didn't know every single detail there was to know about the Pixel 5 and the Pixel 4A 5G. And with every new small detail it became clear that Google has decided to play it extremely safe with these phones. Every decision it made was about bringing costs down without compromising the fundamentals.

"What the world doesn't seem like it needs right now is another $1,000 phone," hardware boss Rick Osterloh told a small group of reporters after the event. I asked him directly if these phones were designed to be low cost specifically with the pandemic in mind, and he said that they were of course planned out before this year but that Google had been anticipating an economic downturn this year.

(Interestingly, Samsung told me that its Galaxy S20 FE was developed this year as the pandemic began. And the Galaxy S20 FE has better specs than the Pixel 5 almost across the board while costing the same amount. Of course, both need full reviews before we really make comparisons. I'm working on the S20 FE now; let me know if you have questions.)

Many of the decisions Google made were in service of keeping the cost down. It excised the Pixel Neural Core processor used for photo processing. It went back to a fingerprint sensor instead of face unlock. It chose to avoid the flashiest phone features like ultra-high resolution displays, three camera arrays, curved screens, and even the most powerful processor available.

The new Pixels aren't just playing it safe in terms of pricing for a bad economy; Google is also being quite conservative in their design. Perhaps the most wow-inducing design feature we heard about is that the Pixel 5 can do wireless charging despite having an all-aluminum body. The trick is that there's a hole milled out in the back and then painted over with plastic. On the Pixel 5 especially, there are innumerable examples of Google sticking to the tried and true.

It kept the same camera sensor Google has been using for years. Google contends that's because it's still the most ideal sensor for its algorithms. I'll admit one surprise for me today is that Google announced several new camera software features that take advantage of those algorithms. I'll be especially curious to see if Google can live up to its own video claims.

Bottom line, though, is that Google is sticking to what it knows with the camera. While other manufacturers are experimenting with higher megapixels and larger sensors, Google's decision to use the same one year over year is risk-averse in the extreme.

There is a new camera, though, an ultrawide sensor replacing the Pixel 4's telephoto. That's the right choice, in my opinion — Google can get something good enough for telephoto in software with its super res zoom capability, but as a PM told me yesterday you can't use pixels that aren't captured by a sensor in the first place. It's still a conservative move, though! Every other phone out there has seen fit to include one, and instead of swimming against that tide Google is going with the flow.

Going back to a rear-mounted fingerprint sensor is a different kind of conservatism. In addition to being cheaper, it's also simply more reliable and faster. I have been using in-screen fingerprint sensors for some time now, but I have to admit they're still not as quick and predictable as a simple capacitive sensor.

All these ways that Google chose to play it safe aren't just justifiable, they may end up being smart. That doesn't mean that these Pixels won't face a rough road trying to compete with Samsung and OnePlus — they will. And there again, I think Google knows it. *Nikkei Asia* is reporting that Google may only produce 800,000 units of the Pixel 5.

Finally, there's 5G. Google's line was that it would "put the G in 5G" and after I recovered from my full-body cringe, I realized it was yet another example of playing it safe. And not in a good way, this time.

Follow me through some observations and then see if you make the same leap I do. It's obvious that US carriers aren't going to give any help to a non-5G phone. It's also obvious that the only US carrier that has really given the Pixel the time of day is Verizon. And Verizon's 5G network is still overly dependent on the mmWave flavor of 5G that only works in a few spots in big cities. And supporting mmWave in a phone is more expensive than simply doing sub-6.

The Pixel 5 costs $699 and there’s one model of it for all carriers. The Pixel 4A is $499, but the Verizon version of it with mmWave costs $100 more. So it stands to reason that the Pixel 5 is more expensive than it could have been without mmWave.

But including it was the safe bet — even if it looks like a mistake. It simplifies the product line, for one thing, and it likely serves as a concession to Verizon. And even though the Pixel is more broadly available these days, Verizon really is the carrier Google can’t afford to offend.

As with unit sales, these carrier politics shouldn’t bother you except insofar as they affect the quality or price of the product — and we’ll get there when we review it. Right now, though, I’m just looking at all the ways that Google chose to play it safe with these new Pixel phones and trying to think through what it could mean.

As I speculated yesterday, it could mean that these Pixels have been tasked with holding down the fort while next year’s Pixels go far afield into new technologies.

Here’s another thing it could mean: good phones! A lot of people — maybe even most people — don’t want their phones to be showcases for bleeding-edge technology. They want something reliable and trustworthy at a reasonable price. It may be that by sticking with so many safe components, the new Pixels could be more popular than even Google seems to expect.

Get caught up

The 7 biggest announcements from Google’s Pixel 5 event.

Live blog: Google’s Pixel 5, 4A 5G, Chromecast, and Nest speaker event.

Google’s Pixel 5 and Chromecast event: all of the latest news.

Pixel 5 and 4A 5G

Google announces the Pixel 5 for $699.

Google announces Pixel 4A 5G with larger 6.2-inch display for $499.

Google says the Pixel’s Soli radar and Motion Sense will return.

Verizon has an exclusive Pixel 4A 5G that’s $100 more expensive.

Here’s how the new Pixel 5 compares with the Pixel 4A 5G and Pixel 4A.

Chromecast with Google TV

Google Chromecast (2020) review: reinvented — and now with a remote.

Google announces new Chromecast with the new Google TV interface.

Google Play Movies & TV is now Google TV but it’s not the same Google TV that runs on Android TV on the new Chromecast, it’s an app.

The new Chromecast with Google TV won’t officially support Stadia at launch.

Chromecast Ultra is dead, long live Chromecast Ultra (and this new Ethernet dongle).

Nest Audio, plus new software

Google’s new Nest Audio smart speaker is official, costs $99.99.

Improved Google Photos editor is rolling out now on Android.

Google’s Recorder app is getting an audio editing feature.

Google’s new ‘Hold for Me’ feature saves you from elevator music.

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