



MOBILE COMMS

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RIM BlackBerry 7100v

PRICE Free to £82 (£97 inc VAT) depending on contract DELIVERY Free

INTERNET www.blackberry.com

SUPPLIER www.vodafone.co.uk

VERDICT It takes time to master the keyboard, web browsing is slow and there's a distinct lack of expandability. But it doesn't matter: the BlackBerry 7100v is a fantastic way to keep in touch with your email, and a great phone too.

Everyone is desperate for their slice of the BlackBerry pie: the past two months have seen a flurry of announcements from Palm, Symbian and a plethora of phone manufacturers declaring their forthcoming support for BlackBerry technology. They all know email is fast becoming a standard feature of mobile devices.

Plenty of modern phones support email, of course, but what always made BlackBerry special was its push technology. With this, you don't need to dial up to collect your email: just sit back and wait for the messages to come to you. Wherever you are, if an urgent email comes through to any of your email addresses – and the 7100v supports up to ten – you can act on it instantly.

Trouble is, there are very few phones available to take advantage. There's the Nokia 6820 (see issue 120, p136), with its fold-out keyboard, but its operating system is looking dated, and you can buy third-party software such as Smartner Duality to push email to smartphones like the Sony Ericsson P900. Otherwise you're restricted to RIM's own devices, such as the BlackBerry 7230 (see issue 107, p75) – and to call this a phone is stretching the definition to its limit. Hold the calculator-like 7230 to your ear, and you'll get some very strange looks indeed. The 7100v, on the other hand, looks to the innocent eye exactly like a hi-tech phone.

We'd still hesitate to call it stylish. The plastic finish looks, well, plastic, and the 7100v has a squat, rectangular look despite RIM's best attempts to style the corners. It's quite portable though: it weighs just 120g and is slimmer than the majority of mobile phones. Admittedly, it's a little wider than your average Nokia, but in return, you get a bright 240 x 260 screen and a 20-key keyboard.

It's the keyboard that separates the 7100v from the competition, as it's the physical sign of RIM's latest innovation: SureType word recognition. Each key holds a maximum of two letters (as opposed to the three on a normal mobile phone), with the QWERTY layout stretched across the top three rows. You just spell out the word as you would when writing a predictive-text SMS, and the correct word should appear on the screen.

As with learning to type, it takes some time to master where each letter is, but we suspect that after a month or two of continuous use most people will be pretty fluent. Just beware that the fluency won't come instantly.

Touch-typists will tell you they don't actually know where the letters are on the keyboard; their fingers just go there instinctively. With the 7100v, your brain will have to re-learn that process. And until it does, you'll be hunting and pecking, which makes writing long replies to emails a tedious process. RIM doesn't help things by not giving the apostrophe its own key – you must hit three keys at the very least to get this one, very frequently used character.

But don't get us wrong. SureType is ingenious, and worth persevering with as it holds advantages over its key rivals. There's no hinge to break, as there is with the Nokia 6820 and Sony Ericsson P900 – and indeed, with several other forthcoming phones that have BlackBerry built-in. The other obvious advantage is that the keys are larger than those of the Handspring Treo 600 (see *Smartphone supplement*, issue 113, p24).

Where the P900 and Treo strike back, however, is with their touchscreens. The only way to navigate the 7100v's graphical interface is via the jog dial that sits on the right side of the device. To an extent, this is fine; it doesn't take long to master scrolling to your chosen icon. You then just select it (by pressing down on the jog dial), which will launch the app.

The annoying part comes when performing tasks such as browsing the Web. You can't just click the link onscreen – you have to scroll to it. Then, press down on the jog dial, wait a moment for the menu options to appear (such as Get Link, Home, Go To and History) and click again to get the link. RIM's browser isn't the fastest either; browsing over GPRS on the Treo is far more satisfying.

The Treo also holds a huge advantage when it comes to downloadable apps. Every type of Palm program, no matter how bizarre, can be downloaded from Handango, while the



It may look like a normal phone, but the 7100v ensures you can always keep on top of your email.

programs for BlackBerrys (and there were none, at the time of publishing, specifically for the 7100 series) are very restricted. What's more, there's just 32MB of RAM onboard and no card slots for adding more.

RIM can largely match the Treo as a personal organiser though. There's full synchronisation with the contacts, calendar and tasks in your choice of PIM (for example, Outlook, ACT! or Lotus Notes), and as the BlackBerry uses Intellisync we found the synchronisation process worked extremely well.

During testing, we had no problems with lost information when syncing with Outlook.

The 7100v also ticks the Bluetooth box, but note that only hands-free headsets and car kits are supported: still, that's two more profiles than the Treo. Far more importantly, RIM has put some effort into making this a great phone.

Sound quality is up there with the best, and if you want to have a conference call you can even turn on the speakerphone and plonk the 7100v in the middle of the table. World travellers will also appreciate the quad-band support.

As with every smartphone – except the 7230, as it happens – you won't be able to last any more than four days on a single charge if you're using the phone regularly. But it recharges through a USB connection, and there's also a neat travel charger that consists,

essentially, of the plug and the USB cable.

The final annoyance we must point out is the 10MB mailbox limit provided by Vodafone (currently the only UK operator offering the 7100v). If someone sends you a couple of large attachments, your space is used up and you won't be able to send or receive until you access your online Vodafone account and start deleting.

So the 7100v isn't without its faults. There are superior phones out there, better personal organisers, and the 7230 is a better emailing device thanks to its full QWERTY keyboard. But if you're looking for a single device to cover all of the above, there's nothing better available.

TIM DANTON

PC PRO RATINGS

PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

SPECIFICATIONS Quad-band GSM; GPRS; 32MB flash memory; 4MB SDRAM; 240 x 260 TFT; Bluetooth; up to 4hrs of talk-time and 8 days of standby; polyphonic ringtones. Dimensions: 56 x 20 x 114mm (WDH). Weight: 120g.