

Review: Microsoft wants you to fire Siri

June 12 2014



Watch out, Siri. Someone wants your job. Since it debuted on the iPhone 4S three years ago, Apple's Siri technology has been synonymous with the concept of a virtual personal assistant. But now comes Cortana, an intelligent assistant from Microsoft that's supposed to be much like Siri, only better.

Cortana is one of the key features of Windows Phone 8.1, the latest update to Microsoft's smartphone software that is beginning to show up in new devices. The feature is something like a combination of Siri and Google Now, the intelligent assistant technology built into Android.

Like Siri, Cortana can send text messages, search for information on the Web and launch applications in response to users' inquiries and statements. As with Siri, users generally don't need to use specific commands, but can talk naturally, as if they were speaking to a real person.

But unlike Siri, Cortana can also act like Google Now, providing information unprompted by a particular inquiry. Looking at your calendar, Cortana can tell you when you need to leave for a crosstown meeting in order to make it on time. And by knowing your favorite sports team, it can keep you updated on the results of its latest games without you asking for the score.

Microsoft has designed Cortana so that individual users can customize it to a much greater degree than they can Siri or Google Now. Inside a settings area, users can view and edit the information Cortana knows about them, such as the name of their spouse or their office address.

Cortana, which, like Siri, allows you to assign it either a male or female voice, also knows some pretty cool tricks. Like Google Now, but unlike Siri, Cortana shows what it hears you saying as you speak. This feedback can reassure you that Cortana is listening and understands what you are saying.

As with Siri, you can use Cortana to set reminders and can specify that you want to be reminded to do them at a particular time or when you arrive at a specific place. But with Cortana, you can also ask to be reminded to do things when you interact with particular people.

So you can ask Cortana to remind you to wish your mother a happy anniversary the next time you talk to her. Then when you send a text to your mother or receive a call from her, Cortana will flash a message on the screen reminding you about the anniversary.

With reminders, Cortana tends to be more inquisitive than Siri. Cortana will ask what time you want to be reminded. And if you want to be reminded of something when you go to a store, say Trader Joe's, it will ask you which Trader Joe's location you mean.

With Siri, you have to remember to tell it that you want to be reminded at a particular time. And Siri was baffled when I said I wanted to be reminded when I got to Trader Joe's.

Cortana has another advantage over Siri. Microsoft is allowing app developers to create custom commands for Cortana, something Apple does not allow for Siri. So in the future, you might be able to ask Cortana to start playing the next episode of "Breaking Bad" that you haven't seen through Netflix. Or you might be to ask Cortana to buy a book for you through Amazon.

By contrast, Siri only recognizes the commands that Apple has plugged into it. Apple hasn't yet allowed app developers to tap into Siri other than for dictation. Over time, Cortana's openness could give it the ability to do a lot more things than Siri can.

But for now, Siri is a lot more capable personal assistant than is Cortana. Either will help me find nearby restaurants, but only Siri will make a reservation for me. Cortana, at best, will direct me to the OpenTable app.

If I tell Siri I want to see "X-Men: Days of Future Past," it will list show times at local theaters and even let me buy tickets. Tell Cortana the same thing and it will simply do a Web search on the movie title.

Cortana also has trouble with sports. It was befuddled when I asked, "Who won last night's hockey game?" and "How many points did Tony Parker score in his last game?" Siri, by contrast, was able to answer both

questions.

There are other things that Cortana can't yet do that Siri can. It can't set a timer, for example. Nor can it post updates to Facebook or Twitter, or send an email message.

And Cortana has other little annoyances. One in particular is the way you launch the feature. It's a two-step process - you press the phone's wake button and then long-press its search button.

That may not seem like much, but it's one or two button presses more than you need with competing assistants. You can activate Siri with only a long press of the iPhone's home button. And on Motorola's Moto X, you can launch Google Now by just saying "OK Google Now," with no button press required.

Cortana has the potential to be a very capable [personal assistant](#) in the not-to-distant future. But I wouldn't fire Siri just yet.

MICROSOFT'S CORTANA PERSONAL ASSISTANT:

-Likes: Displays text as you speak it; allows users to set reminders based on when they interact with contacts; prompts users to provide notification times or places when setting reminders; allows [app developers](#) to create their own custom voice commands; allows users to view and edit the personal information it remembers about them.

-Dislikes: Limited set of capabilities; won't schedule restaurant reservations or purchase movie tickets; has trouble with sports information such as looking up scores or player statistics; can't post updates to social networks, set timers or send email; requires two-button presses to launch.

-Price: Free with Windows Phone 8.1.

-Web: microsoft.com

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