

BlackBerry users beset by second outage in a week

(AP) -- The second outage of BlackBerry service in less than a week frustrated people who depend on the messaging device and comes at a bad time for its maker, which faces increasing competition in the market it helped pioneer.

BlackBerry subscribers often are so reliant on the devices that they peck at their keyboards all day and keep them on their night stands while they sleep. When e-mail and Web service on the devices went out Tuesday night, Twitter and other online forums were peppered with complaints.

BlackBerry service was restored Wednesday morning, and the company behind the service, Canada's Research in Motion Ltd., blamed a software upgrade for the problem. The glitch, which comes after another outage last Thursday, could damage the company's reputation.

"One of RIM's big advantages is that it's perceived as a reliable device," said Duncan Stewart, director of research and analysis at DSam Consulting. "To lose the advantage of reliability would in fact be a very big deal for this company."

Herbert Sexton, 34, said his BlackBerry service has been spotty all week where he lives near Atlanta. One day no messages come in at all and the next, 130 e-mails flood his inbox. Messages he's already replied to pop up again. He said the disruption could push him to a different phone.

"I like to have something constant," he said. "If service keeps going out, you never know what to expect."

RIM has sold more than 75 million BlackBerrys worldwide since the gadget debuted at the start of this decade and became part of popular culture. It earned the nickname "CrackBerry" among people who became addicted to using it to stay productive or in touch with others while on the go. Frequent users of its compact keyboard have been known to complain of suffering from "BlackBerry Thumb."

RIM counts more than 36 million subscribers, including 500,000 in the U.S. government. President Barack Obama has been a BlackBerry devotee.

After originally focusing on corporate or government customers, RIM has expanded into the consumer market in recent years with touch-screen models as the BlackBerry Storm. The consumer market, however, can be more fickle. And there RIM faces tough competition from devices such as Apple's iPhone, Palm's Pre and the Motorola Droid. RIM's stock has dropped 23 percent since September.

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The iPhone in particular stole much of RIM's thunder because of its design cachet and the seemingly limitless supply of programs, known as "apps," that users can download to customize their phones. Yet the iPhone also has not been as reliable as many users would like. AT&T, the sole carrier of the device in the U.S., has been upgrading its network to reduce the dropped connections and long waits people have encountered when trying to run programs.

Although RIM's service is sold by wireless carriers, RIM manages its messaging network itself. That can improve reliability, but the centralized structure also means that any problems can affect millions of users. BlackBerry service went out at least three times in 2008.

This week's outage apparently stemmed from a flaw in recently released versions of RIM's instant messaging software, known as BlackBerry Messenger. On Wednesday, RIM released a new version that resolves the program and encouraged anyone who downloaded or upgraded BlackBerry Messenger since Dec. 14 to upgrade to this latest version.

RIM, which is based in Waterloo, Ontario, apologized for any inconvenience experienced by customers.

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