

Microsoft CEO takes CES stage amid tablet crush

One year ago, Microsoft Corp. CEO Steve Ballmer took the stage at the tech industry's premier gadget show to showcase a Windows tablet computer to an audience that had yet to meet the iPad.

This year, with tablets marking the hottest items at the show and Windows lagging far behind Apple Inc.'s popular iPad, the stakes are higher. Slipping is Microsoft's status as a technology oracle, which has landed it a standing appointment delivering the trade show's night-before keynote each year.

Beyond tablets, Ballmer's talk Wednesday was expected to roughly follow the other major themes emerging at this year's International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas - areas where Microsoft has also failed to take the lead despite spending years developing products.

Among them: smart phones and Internet television, two areas where Google Inc. and Apple, which aren't even attending the trade show, are getting most of the attention.

Gadget makers including AsusTek Computer Inc. and Vizio Inc., the TV company, have already unveiled new tablet computers this week, and more were expected from the likes of Motorola Inc., Dell Inc. and Toshiba Corp. Many of the new tablets will use Android, Google Inc.'s operating software that was initially designed for smart phones.

So far, none of the tablets running Microsoft's Windows 7 have made waves with mainstream consumers.

This year's trade show, which runs Thursday to Sunday, will also see TV makers adjusting strategies for selling 3-D televisions after a year of tepid sales. LG Electronics Inc. said Wednesday it will be among the TV makers switching from sets that require expensive battery-powered glasses to ones that work with cheaper glasses like those used in movie theaters.

For Microsoft, a software maker, Internet-connected televisions or set-top boxes from competitors such as Google and Apple are more of a concern. Microsoft has had an Internet TV system for many years, but its customers have been telecommunications companies that repackaged the service to their own subscribers - not consumers directly. Google and Apple, however, have gone straight to consumers with Internet TV offerings under their own brands.

This will be Ballmer's third year leading the gadget show address. He took the mantle from Microsoft co-founder and chairman, Bill Gates, who had used the stage for the preceding 10 years to talk about his vision for the future of technology.

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Gates used the opportunity to predict the rise of PCs in U.S. homes, the arrival of portable touch screens that would display Internet content and music streamed from a home PC and the advent of even simple gadgets such as pens that can connect to the Internet.

He was not always right about the timing, or the specific device or software that would bring about the revolution.

A most memorable case in point: the tablet computer. Gates talked about it a decade ago, but it is only in the last year that the tablet - a slim touch-screen computer with no keyboard - has caught consumers' imaginations in a big way.

Ballmer took over Gates' role as CEO but not as company visionary; as such, his pronouncements have not seemed as grand or oracle-like. But people will be paying particularly close attention this year, seeking signs that Microsoft has made progress since Ballmer took the stage one year ago.

The 2010 gadget show opened a full three months before the iPad went on sale, and Microsoft was already bracing for its arrival. Ballmer demonstrated a tablet computer from Hewlett-Packard Co. that was good for reading books, surfing the Web and other consumer tasks. Before the HP machine even came to market, however, Apple came out with its device, giving it a significant head start in the nascent market.

One year out, there has yet to be a mainstream Windows 7 tablet hit, yet tablets are the hottest category at the show. Some analysts believe Apple has sold more than 13 million iPads. Gartner Inc., a research group, predicts 55 million tablets will be shipped in 2011.

While Windows 7 remains a question mark for its prospects as a tablet system, analysts are already talking about Windows 8, expected to launch in 2012.

Microsoft showed a very early version of an unnamed Windows update Wednesday. And the company confirmed that a version will run on cell phone chips, providing an alternative for the first time to the chips based on Intel Corp. technology.

Microsoft's smart phone system may also get some time on the stage. The software maker, which is based in Redmond, Wash., launched its answer to the iPhone and Android toward the end of 2010.

Windows Phone 7, as the system is called, has a lot of catching up to do in terms of both the number of users and the number of "apps" available for the phones. On Wednesday, handset makers Motorola Mobility Inc., HTC Corp. and Samsung Electronics Co. showed off several upcoming smart phones that will run on AT&T Inc.'s higher-speed "HSPA+" network. All the phones will run a version of Android, not Windows.

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