

RIM releases belated new PlayBook software

ROB GILLIES - Associated Press - Associated Press

Research In Motion released a free upgraded operating system for its struggling Playbook computer tablet on Tuesday, almost a year later than it first said it would.

The BlackBerry maker said the software allows for built-in email, calendar and contacts on the tablet. When RIM launched the PlayBook last April it said would add the critical features within 60 days, but later pushed that back to the summer and then to October and finally to February.

The PlayBook received negative reviews because it launched without an email program.

The PlayBook OS 2.0 software update is available as a free download. It also allows users to use their BlackBerry's as a keyboard and mouse for the Playbook.

The Playbook is RIM's first effort to branch out from its smartphone base and capture a portion of the tablet computer market. The tablets however haven't been selling well, forcing the company to sell them at a deep discount.

In December, the tablets that originally cost \$500 were selling for \$200, below the cost of making them. RIM wrote off \$485 million worth of inventory.

The Waterloo, Ontario-based company said they sold 150,000 Playbook tablets last quarter. That number pales in comparison to the top-selling iPad, of which Apple shipped 15.4 million units during its most recent quarter.

Jim Balsillie and Mike Lazaridis stepped aside as RIM's co-CEOs last month. Thorsten Heins became the new chief as the once-iconic maker of the BlackBerry smartphone confronts the most difficult period in its history.

Americans are abandoning their Blackberrys for flashier touch-screen phones such as Apple's iPhone and various competing models that run Google's Android software.

RIM's U.S. market share of smartphones dropped from 44 percent in 2009 to 10 percent in 2011, according to market researcher NPD Group.

The company still has 75 million active subscribers, but many analysts believe the company will lose market share internationally, just as it has in the U.S.

RIM, which was worth more than \$70 billion a few years ago, now has a market value of around \$7.9 billion.

Analysts have said RIM's future depends on a delayed new software platform for its

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BlackBerry smartphone. RIM said in December the new phones deemed critical to the company's future would be delayed until late this year. Heins, formerly a little known chief operating officer, said getting the new phones to market this year is his top priority.

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