BlackBerry marketing head undeterred by share loss

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The new marketing chief for BlackBerry smartphones isn't dejected by perceptions that his products look ancient next to iPhones and Android devices.

Frank Boulben, four weeks into his job as chief marketing officer for Research in Motion Ltd., promises to impress people when phones running the company's new BlackBerry 10 software are released in early 2013, at least a year later than analysts had expected.

RIM will tout features that current devices lack, he said. Few details about BlackBerry 10 have been released, but the company has said it will include the ability to run multiple programs at once and will let users switch between programs without returning to the home screen. Android devices and iPhones typically require people to return to the home screen to start or resume an app, while traditional computers let you jump directly to them.

"You'll be able to flow seamlessly from one application to another," Boulben said in an interview Monday with The Associated Press. "The underlying operating system is truly multitasking."

But touting new features is just part of the challenge. BlackBerry devices will be handicapped because, compared with rivals, they have fewer games, utilities and other apps available to extend the phones' functionality.

Analysts believe RIM is running out of time to turn itself around. RIM is holding its annual shareholders meeting in Waterloo, Ontario, on Tuesday, less than two weeks after announcing disappointing financial results, deep job cuts and the latest delay in BlackBerry 10. Its stock is trading near a nine-year low and closed Monday at $7.67, down 43 cents, or 5.3 percent, for the day.

Sales of the once-pioneering BlackBerry phones fell 41 percent in the latest quarter and likely won't pick up again until new phones come out next year. By then, people will have even more choices, including a new iPhone expected from Apple this fall and phones running the latest version of Google's Android software, called Jelly Bean. Phones running a revamped version of Microsoft's Windows system are also coming this fall.

Although BlackBerrys were once a staple in corporate environments because of their reputation for security and reliability, they've lost their cachet as iPhones demonstrated that smartphones are good for more than email. The BlackBerry's U.S. market share has plummeted from 41 percent in 2007, when the first iPhone came out, to less than 4 percent in the first three months of 2012, according to

research firm IDC.

RIM portrays BlackBerry 10 as its way of catching up. It promises the multimedia, Internet browsing and apps experience that customers now demand. Better multitasking, Boulben said, is one way the new BlackBerry won't become a "me too" product.

Boulben said the smartphone market is still new and growing, so RIM can go after the millions of people around the world who still don't have smartphones. He added that people in the U.S. replace their phones every 18 months on average, giving RIM a chance to lure them with the new BlackBerry devices.

"We won't be present for this year, but next year we will be present in a larger market," he said.

Boulben also said he has developed a global marketing strategy for BlackBerry 10. In the past, countries and regions ran their own campaigns, which caused conflicting messages to appear when people searched for information online.

Centralizing marketing, he said, will reduce costs and allow the company to take better advantage of global social-networking services such as Facebook. He's counting on word of mouth once the first people get their hands on new BlackBerrys.

But BlackBerrys will still be far behind in the number of apps available from outside software developers. These are the games, maps, photo-sharing programs and other tools that extend the functionality and popularity of existing devices. Apple and Google each claim more than 500,000 apps for iPhone and Android devices, while BlackBerry's app store has fewer than 100,000.

To succeed, RIM will need to excite not only phone buyers, but also the software developers who'd make the BlackBerry apps. Analyst Steven Li at Raymond James has warned that the repeated BlackBerry 10 delays could discourage those developers from doing so.

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