Holiday gadgets: Microsoft phones, Google gadgets

ANICK JESDANUN - AP Technology Writer - Associated Press

Microsoft launched its new Windows phone system and Google unveiled new devices under its Nexus brand. Both part of an effort to grab more of consumers' holiday-shopping dollars.

Last week, Microsoft started selling its Windows 8 operating system and Surface tablet computer. Apple announced new iPads and Mac computers. Samsung launched a giant smartphone.

Barnes & Noble Inc. will start shipping new Nook devices Thursday, while Apple's new iPads, including a smaller one, will be out Friday. A larger version of Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle Fire comes out later in the month.

These are some of the gadgets to expect for the holidays:

— APPLE DEVICES

Apple has done well selling its full-sized tablet computer, which has a screen that measures nearly 10 inches diagonally. But companies such as Amazon.com Inc. and Google Inc. have made inroads selling tablets with smaller, 7-inch screens and lower price tags.

To maintain its dominance, Apple will start shipping the iPad Mini on Friday, though new orders through Apple's website will take longer because initial supplies had sold out. It will have a 7.9-inch screen, making it slightly larger than those smaller rivals but about two-thirds the size of a regular iPad.

The iPad Mini starts at $329, well above the $159 starting price for Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle Fire and $199 for Google Inc.'s Nexus 7. Both have 7-inch screens. The Mini will be just $70 cheaper than the 2011 iPad 2, which is still available.

Apple will make a version of the iPad Mini that can access cellular networks from AT&T, Verizon and Sprint. That version will start at $459, compared with $629 for the full-sized cellular model.

Apple is also refreshing its full-sized iPad, giving it a faster processor and faster Wi-Fi capabilities.

Meanwhile, Apple has unveiled a 13-inch version of a MacBook Pro with sharper, "Retina" display, complementing the 15-inch version unveiled in June. Apple also updated its iMac line.

Last month, Apple began selling its iPhone 5. The new phone is bigger, but thinner than previous models and works with faster cellular networks known as 4G.

— PHONE RIVAL

Apple's leading rival, Samsung Electronics Co., came out with a new version of its flagship phone, the Galaxy S III, months ago. But Samsung is known for releasing products throughout the year, each targeted at a different base of consumers.

For those who like to work with a stylus, the Galaxy Note II smartphone came out last week. T-Mobile, Sprint and U.S. Cellular are selling it now. Verizon and AT&T are taking advance orders for shipments in the coming weeks.

The Note comes on the heels of Samsung's campaign touting its Galaxy S III phone as its "next big thing." The Note is even bigger, with a 5.5 inch screen, compared with the S III's 4.8 inches and the iPhone 5's 4 inches, all measured diagonally.

The Note runs the latest version of Google's Android system, Jelly Bean.

Google, meanwhile, announced a small update to Jelly Bean and said it will be included with its Nexus 4 smartphone out next month.

— TABLET RIVALS

Amazon's 7-inch Kindle Fire is one of the smaller tablets with decent sales. Last month, it started shipping an updated version with a faster processor, more memory and longer battery life. It also cut the price to $159, from $199, making it far cheaper than the iPad, which starts at $399.

Amazon is also releasing higher-end models under the Kindle Fire HD line. A 7-inch one goes for $199 and an 8.9-inch one for $299. There's also a $499 model that can use the 4G cellular networks that phone companies have been building. A data plan will cost an extra $50 a year. The smaller HD model is already available, while the larger ones will be available Nov. 20.

Barnes and Noble Inc. is also updating its Nook tablets. The new Nook HD will come in two sizes, one at 7 inches (starting at $199) and one at 9 inches (starting at $269). They will be out Thursday.

In addition to the new HD screen and a lighter body, Barnes & Noble is increasing the services the Nook offers. It's adding a video purchase and rental service, allowing users to maintain different profiles and making it easier to browse titles in its book and magazine stores.

Google, meanwhile, is introducing a 10-inch Nexus tablet starting at $399, $100 less than comparable versions of the latest iPads. It is doubling the storage capacity of existing 7-inch models and introducing a version capable of accessing cellular networks. The new Nexus 7 is available now, while the other devices are coming Nov. 13.

— CALLING ON WINDOWS

Microsoft Corp. released a new version of the Windows operating system on Friday, one that's designed to work on both traditional computers and tablet devices. Desktops, laptops and tablet computers with Windows 8 started going on sale Friday.

Microsoft also released its own tablet computer, the Surface. It's new territory for Microsoft, which typically leaves it to others to make devices using its software. Now, it will be competing against its partners.

One model will run on the same type of lower-energy chips used in the iPad. It will start at $499, also like the newest, full-sized iPads. A keyboard cover will cost another $100. Sales started Friday.

A heavier, more expensive version will run on Intel chips and be capable of running standard Windows applications. Microsoft hasn't announced the date or price for that yet.

A new version of the Windows Phone system is coming out this fall as well. Once-dominant phone maker Nokia Corp. has been struggling in the shadow of Apple and Android, and it's counting on the new Windows system for a revival. Nokia, Samsung and HTC are launching eight Windows Phone 8 smartphones combined by year's end, starting this weekend overseas and later in November in the U.S.

— NEW BLACKBERRYS

A year ago, Research In Motion Ltd. disclosed that it was working on a next-generation phone system for the BlackBerry, which now looks ancient next to the iPhone and Android devices. It was supposed to be out in time for this year's holiday season. That won't happen.

In June, RIM pushed the release of BlackBerry 10 devices into early next year, saying it wasn't ready. That means RIM will not only compete with the new iPhone and Android devices out this fall, but it will also have to contend with the new Windows devices.

— PLAYING GAMES

Nintendo's new Wii U game machine will go on sale in the U.S. on Nov. 18. A basic, white model will cost $300. A deluxe black version for another $50 comes with an extra game and more accessories. The GamePad touch-screen controller for it will offer new ways to play.

In "New Super Mario Bros. U.," for example, players holding the old Wii controllers control Mario, Luigi and other characters. The person with the GamePad can help them along by using a stylus to create stepping stones for the characters or stun enemies.

Players can also turn off the TV entirely and play on the GamePad.

Nintendo Co. has been trying to drum up excitement for the Wii U, the first major gaming console to launch since 2006.

The company also announced new entertainment features for the console. Called Nintendo TVii, the service collects all the ways users have to watch movies, TV shows and sports. This includes pay-TV accounts along with services such as Hulu and Netflix. The GamePad works as a fancy remote controller and will let viewers comment on what they are watching.

TVii will be available Nov. 18 as well, at no extra cost.

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