Apple is biggest US phone seller for 1st time

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The launch of the iPhone 5 and the declining popularity of non-smartphones have made Apple the biggest seller of phones in the U.S. for the first time, research firm Strategy Analytics said Friday.

The firm estimates that Apple shipped 17.7 million iPhones of all kinds to U.S. buyers in the October to December period, meaning it accounted for one in three new phones.

Samsung Electronics of Korea was close behind, shipping 16.8 million phones, including non-smart ones. Samsung has been the largest seller of phones to the U.S. market since 2008, Strategy Analytics said.

Worldwide, Samsung is still the biggest phone vendor with 23 percent of the market, according to another research firm, IDC. Apple is number three, with 9.9 percent of the market. In between sits Nokia with 17.9 percent.

Samsung beats Apple even when only smartphones are considered. It shipped 63.7 million units worldwide versus Apple's 47.8 million.

IPhones are more expensive than most Samsung smartphones. So, they're well within reach for U.S. buyers, but not for buyers in the developing world, where cheaper phones running Google Inc.'s Android operating system dominate.

In the U.S., iPhone sales are usually very strong in the first few months after a new model is released. They then taper off. That means Samsung could regain the smartphone crown as early as this quarter.

The NPD Group, another research firm, on Friday said the iPhone 5 was the single most popular phone in the U.S. in the holiday quarter. The Samsung Galaxy S III was No. 2, followed by the older iPhone models, the 4S and 4.

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