Networking creates devices buzz at mobile fair

Paul Sandle, Reuters

(Reuters) - Networks, whether superfast mobile broadband, wifi or a combination of both, are helping add pizzazz to new mobile products as the rapid evolution in smartphone and tablet design slows to a trickle.

The world's fastest smartphone, new "phablets" - sized between a phone and tablet - and small tablets optimized to watch video and run multiple applications on 4G mobile networks were making the biggest splash at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona.

Networks are also enabling millions of other devices, from coffee makers to bicycles and cars to homes, to become "smart".

Chipmaker Qualcomm Inc [1] for instance demonstrated a connected home in which a smartphonecoffee can be used to start a coffer maker and speakers burst into sound when you enter the room, thanks to the handset in your pocket.

Such innovations are made possible by AllJoyn, an open-source software framework compatible with mobile operating systems Android, Windows and iOs, that allows devices to speak to each other directly without needing a separate server.

"We are making the Internet of everything a seamless blend of the physical and the digital world," said Brian Spencer, engineer at Qualcomm Innovation Center.

U.S. network operator AT&T Inc, meanwhile, is adding your home and your car to your smartphone contacts.

Its Digital Life product allows a user to automate and monitor his or her home remotely, and it has replaced Verizon Communications Inc [2] as mobile partner for General Motors Co's OnStar connected car service.

Glenn Lurie, AT&T president of emerging enterprises, said the next step would be joining the two products together, creating a smart ecosystem dedicated to an individual.

"When my wife drives into the house and flips the garage door open, the house will know she's home and unlock the door and turns the thermostat up; that's the future," Lurie said.

NEXT BIG THING

Meanwhile wearable devices are the next big thing to be connected, industry watchers say. Google Inc revealed on YouTube last week some of the features of Google Glass, a pair of glasses that allows users to see information and record

video.

Apple [3] Inc, meanwhile, is experimenting with the design of a smart device similar to a wristwatch made with curved glass, according to a New York Times report.

In Barcelona, many of the wearables were designed to keep tabs on health problems.

A blood sugar monitor was being used by cyclists, with real-time data sent to a Sony Corp Xperia smartphone on the handlebars. Readings can then be sent to doctors using a secure mobile connection.

It will be used by a team of diabetics riding between Brussels and Barcelona next month, said trip organizer Adam Denton.

Most new smartphones and tablets unveiled at the show, however, displayed no departure from the touch-screen format popularized by Apple [3] and Samsung Electronics Co Ltd.

Device maker Huawei set itself apart by emphasizing the connection speed of its flagship smartphone, the Ascend P2, while Japan's NEC Corp took a fresh approach to smartphone form with a device offering screens back and front that can be unfolded to make a 5.6 inch-sized tablet.

Olaf Swantee, chief executive of British network operator EE, said faster networks were changing how people use their devices and how manufacturers were designing kit.

"Miniaturization was the big thing a few years ago, but now, with customers able to do more on their screens than ever before, we're seeing device manufacturers maximize screen space, not minimize it," he said at the show.

(Editing by David Holmes)

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