

Google's products dig deeper into people's lives

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — For

Google CEO Larry Page, happiness is a warm computer.

"Technology should do the hard work so people can get on doing the things that make them happiest in life," Page told a crowd of 6,000 software developers and entrepreneurs who flocked to San Francisco Wednesday for the opening day of Google's annual showcase for its latest breakthroughs.

In the latest display of its technological prowess and sweeping ambition, Google is rolling out another wave of products and services that will test how much more people want computers to control their lives and enhance their perceptions of reality.

This year's event mostly consisted of upgrades to existing Google services that have already become daily habits for millions of people — one of Page's main goals. The new features assume most people want more help managing their lives from Google's brainy engineers and the sprawling data centers that house its millions of computers around the world.

Investors are increasingly becoming convinced that Google's tentacles are going to grasp more moneymaking opportunities as its dominant search engine and ancillary services become more pervasive on the mobile devices.

Google already has an enviable perch on the smartphones and tablets that have become people's constant companions. Its Android software has been activated on 900 million devices worldwide. In the first quarter of this year, Android devices held a 74 percent share of the global smartphone market followed by the Apple's iPhone at 18 percent, according to the research firm IDC. Android also led the tablet market with a 56.5 percent share versus 40 percent for Apple's iPad during the first quarter, according to another research firm, Gartner Inc.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

Google's products and services have also made major inroads among users of the iPhone and iPad, despite Apple's recent efforts to cast aside some of Google's products.

In a show of Wall Street's faith, Google's stock surged past \$900 for the first time Wednesday to propel the company's market value beyond \$300 billion for the first time. Google shares gained \$28.79, or more than 3 percent, to close at \$915.89. The latest milestone came less than three months after Google shares surpassed \$800 for the first time. The stock has increased 55 percent since Page, Google's co-founder, succeeded his mentor, Eric Schmidt, as CEO two years ago.

In contrast, investors have become exasperated with rival Apple's lack of breakthrough products since its visionary CEO Steve Jobs died in October 2011. Apple's stock has plunged by nearly 40 percent since last September, leaving the shares at \$428.85. Still, Apple's market value remains nearly \$100 billion higher than Google's.

Page, 40, seemed to share some of that frustration Wednesday in a rare 45-minute appearance that capped a three-and-half hour presentation of Google's latest products. His appearance came the day after he disclosed that both his vocal cords have been hobbled to the point that it makes it difficult to speak for extended periods —and sometimes breathe when exercising.

Without mentioning Apple by name, Page said more companies need to develop products "outside their comfort zone." It's something that Page says he has also insisted on Google doing since he started the company with Sergey Brin in 1998. Some of the gambles, like expansions into digital mapping and email, have paid off. Others, such as creating an alternative to Wikipedia and a social networking service called Buzz, have been flops.

"Every time we have tried to do something crazy, we have usually made progress," Page said. "So we have been emboldened."

The latest examples of audacious Google experiments that appear likely to become viable products include autonomously driven cars and Google Glass, an Internet-connected device with a built-in camera and small display screen that can be worn around a person's face like a pair of spectacles. Several Google employees and developers who bought a test version of Google Glass were wearing the device as they walked around the conference Wednesday.

Google Glass stole last year's conference when a group of skydivers wearing the device were shown jumping from dirigible above the building where the meeting was being held. Their descent was shown live to the audience using the Google Glass camera.

By comparison, this year's conference was more sedate, though the features that were announced will have a more immediate impact.

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A virtual assistant called Google Now will now be able to deliver reminders to pick up the milk when a person is in a grocery store or call certain friends when visiting certain cities. Google Now also has been programmed to understand more spoken questions so it can be even more helpful. The technology is being expanded to work on Chrome Web browsers so it can be accessed on personal computers, extending its reach beyond smartphones and tablets. With the wider availability, the Google Now technology is likely to be used more frequently, enabling Google's engineers to gain an even better understanding of human behavior. In turn, they can deploy artificial intelligence and machine learning tools to do a better job of anticipating users' needs.

Google Plus, the company's social networking answer to Facebook, is getting a facelift. The new look will include several automated features that promise to figure out appropriate hash tags for each post on the service and identify the best photos uploaded by individual users. What's more, Google Plus will offer to automatically touch up photos so users won't have to bother. The alterations will include red-eye removal, the smoothing of wrinkles, and sharpening of landscapes.

All of Google Plus' automated tools can be turned off.

Google Maps, which has become the world's most trusted navigation system with more than 1 billion visitors each week, is adding even more tools, pictures, business ratings and discount offers from nearby merchants.

Google also hopes to help steer people's entertainment choices with Wednesday's launch of a subscription-based music service that will let users of Android phones and tablets listen to their favorite songs and artists for a monthly fee.

The streaming service, called All Access, is available in the U.S. for \$9.99 per month after a 30-day free trial. It will be available in other countries later. For those who start the trial by June 30, the monthly fee is \$7.99.

All Access will compete with Spotify, Rhapsody, Pandora Media Inc. and other popular music services. Apple, the biggest seller of online music, does not have a subscription-based service, though there has been rampant speculation that the company intends to start one later this year.

Contrary to speculation leading up to the conference, Google didn't unveil the next generation of a mini-tablet called the Nexus 7 that sells for \$199.

Instead, the company announced that it will be selling a version of Samsung's new flagship phone, the Galaxy S4, which runs a "clean" version of Android, without the modifications that Samsung applies to its phones.

Google will sell a Galaxy S4 with 16 gigabytes of internal memory for \$649 in the U.S, beginning June 26. That's \$20 more than T-Mobile US charges for the stock phone. Google's version will work on the T-Mobile and AT&T networks, with support for the latest and fastest "LTE" data network technology.

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In his talk, Page hinted that Google prefers taking big risks rather than releasing incremental upgrades. "We should be building great things that don't exist," he said.

Source URL (retrieved on 10/30/2014 - 10:16am):

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