Sony Plays Catch-Up With Apple On Tablets

Manufacturing.net

TOKYO (AP) -- Sony Corp. said Thursday it wants to become the biggest player in Japan's growing Android tablet market by changing the way the devices are used.

The Japanese electronics and entertainment giant unveiled its first tablets to the rest of the world Wednesday, diving into the intense race at home and abroad to catch Apple's iPad.

Sony will begin selling the Tablet S in Japan on Sept. 17 starting at about 45,000 yen ($584). The device is about the size of an iPad but features a wedge-shaped design that makes it easier to hold. It can also double as a universal remote control.

The smaller, dual-screened Tablet P will hit Japanese stores by November at a price yet to be determined.

The Tablet P is small enough to fit in a purse and opens like a book to reveal two screens. When used for e-book reading, it can be held vertically and show one page on each screen. When composing e-mail, the upper screen can show the message while the lower one shows a keyboard.

Akihiro Matsubara, corporate vice president of Sony Marketing Inc., told reporters in Tokyo on Thursday thatJapan's tablet market is expected to hit 2 million units this fiscal year through March and expand to 3.2 million the following year.

The iPad holds about 85 percent of Japan's tablet market, though Android-based tablets are expected to gradually gain ground.

Sony found that in Japan, tablets are purchased for casual, personal use, Matsubara said. The Tokyo-based company hopes to change that.

By integrating content from its other properties, Sony hopes to transform tablets into household necessities used by the whole family.

The devices will connect to Sony's cloud-computing based library of content such as movies and music, as well as to Sony PlayStation video games adapted for running on Android and digital books from Sony's Reader store.

Computing for the general user is no longer about hardware specs, Matsubara said.

"It's about what you can do with a tablet, and how easily you can do it," he said.

Whether consumers will bite is another matter. Initial reaction online has been mixed, with some reviewers underwhelmed by the user interface despite praising the wedge design.

Earlier this week, Macquarie Capital Securities downgraded its rating on Sony's stock one notch to neutral. It cited deteriorating sales of electronics and a more pessimistic long-term outlook about the company's key products.

Macquarie analyst Jeff Loff expressed concerns that prices may be too high for Sony's tablets.

Also, "we think the ... clamshell design will fail," he said.

Other electronics companies are trying to differentiate their tablets from the iPad as well. On Tuesday, Lenovo Corp. launched a "business-oriented" tablet that comes with a stylus.

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AP Technology Writer Peter Svensson in New York contributed to this report.

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