

Keynote at CES will test Ballmer's star power

January 6 2009, By Benjamin J. Romano

Not that he needed one, but Bill Gates had rock star Slash help him cap his performance at the International Consumer Electronics Show last year.

After keeping Microsoft on center stage at the annual gathering of all things silicon and circuitry for more than a decade, Gates said goodbye to CES last year, six months before he dialed back at Microsoft to pursue philanthropy full time.

But Microsoft has managed to hold onto the coveted preshow keynote address at CES.

On Wednesday, Gates' longtime friend, business partner and successor as CEO, Steve Ballmer, will step before the industry and announce what's next from Microsoft.

Ballmer is no stranger to the CES stage. He joined Gates for an Xbox 360 boxing match in 2006 and has been featured in the spoof videos that became a hallmark of Gates' appearances.

The Consumer Electronics Association had little trouble selecting Ballmer to continue Microsoft's tradition, even though other exhibitors are interested in the prime real estate and some have questioned why the software giant is the only recurring presenter at the show, said Gary Shapiro, the association's president and CEO.

"Microsoft deserves a shot at this in 2009," Shapiro said.

Gates' preshow speech evolved into the biggest event at CES, with people lining up hours in advance to grab a place in the ballroom.

The cacophony of CES announcements and events quiets for a few hours and the eyes of the media and industry focus on the presenter.

"The line for Gates' keynote was always pretty huge," said Matt Rosoff, an analyst with Kirkland, Wash.-based Directions on Microsoft.

"It will be interesting to see if Ballmer draws the same kind of crowd," Rosoff said.

Microsoft has used the platform to launch its biggest consumer products, including the Xbox in 2001, and lay out a big-picture strategy for its consumer-electronics future.

That's one of the things the Consumer Electronics Association looks for in keynote presenters, Shapiro said. Other criteria include:

- _ CEO or equivalent of an international company.

- _ Power to draw journalists, financial analysts and other audiences that wouldn't otherwise attend.

- _ Willingness to invest in the presentation through star power and staging upgrades.

- _ An important strategic connection to the show.

The line to get in to Ballmer's address will be watched closely as a proxy for interest in him and Microsoft.

Ballmer will be joined on stage by Robbie Bach, president of the

Entertainment and Devices Division, responsible for many of Microsoft's consumer-focused offerings.

Shapiro and Rosoff expect a substantial crowd.

"He still is the CEO of Microsoft," Rosoff said. "People do know who he is. I don't know if he's got quite the same legendary status as Bill Gates, but he's an interesting guy. ... Even if you don't agree with what he's saying, he is a fun person to watch."

Shapiro said he's been sleeping better for not having to worry about the logistics and security that surrounded Gates' appearances.

"I'm happy to have a star rather than a superstar."

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Citation: Keynote at CES will test Ballmer's star power (2009, January 6) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-01-keynote-ces-ballmer-star-power.html>

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