

Palm's webOS hasn't gotten the attention it deserves

November 11 2009, By Troy Wolverton



Palm Pre

Lost in the recent deluge of smart-phone news -- Apple's iPhone store hitting 100,000 applications, and the launches of the new Droid phone and the BlackBerry Storm, among other things -- have been the efforts of longtime handheld gadget maker Palm.

That's unfortunate, because I still consider Palm's webOS software, which debuted in June on its Pre, to be the most elegant and easiest-to-use smart-phone operating system available.

Like Apple's iPhone operating system, webOS allows users to interact with it via a number of touch-screen gestures such as pinching and swiping, but webOS takes the concept further, using gestures in places where the iPhone would rely on hard-to-click virtual buttons.

Like Google's [Android](#) operating system, webOS will run multiple applications at once, but it makes closing or switching between those programs much simpler.

Fortunately, Palm has some news of its own that could help boost the prospects of both webOS and of the company. I'm just hoping people pay attention -- and that it's not already too late.

Next month, the company will essentially relaunch its [application store](#), potentially boosting the number of programs users will find there.

To date, Palm has listed in its App Catalog only programs submitted by a select few companies, such as The New York Times, Pandora and ESPN. But beginning next month, the store will be open to the unwashed masses of [software developers](#). According to the company, its development kit for webOS has seen tens of thousands of downloads, which could indicate a coming boom in the number of apps available for Palm devices.

That's something Palm needs. [Smart-phones](#) are handheld computers. As is true with PCs, having access to a robust collection of programs is quickly becoming an essential feature for the devices.

The more programs available for smart-phones, the more the gadgets can

do. And the more programs available for a particular phone or phone [operating system](#), the more likely that platform will attract new users. And, completing the loop, the more users a platform has, the more likely it will be that programmers will write new applications for it, giving it added abilities.

But the opposite is also probably true. Fewer apps means fewer users means fewer developers.

Unfortunately, Palm seems to be learning this lesson the hard way. Not only did it delay opening up the App Catalog to the masses until six months after the Pre's launch, but it didn't open up its development kit _ which is the first thing programmers need to be able to write software for a particular platform -- until July, and it didn't allow its hand-picked developers to charge for their applications until September.

When the Pre launched, owners could choose from about a dozen or so applications in Palm's App Catalog. Today, thanks to Palm's dithering, they can pick from a whopping 320.

Over the same period, the number of [iPhone](#) programs doubled from 50,000. And the number of Android programs has grown by the thousands to about 12,000 now.

While you can't make a direct connection between application development and phone sales -- other factors, such as Palm's choice of Sprint, a second-tier major carrier also haven't helped matters -- the numbers there don't look very good for Palm.

Palm hasn't disclosed how many Pres it's sold. But the company has sold just 1.2 million phones total -- including not only Pres but its older Centros and Treos -- in the two quarters that it's been shipping the Pre. In contrast, just last quarter, Apple sold 7.4 million iPhones and Google's

manufacturing partners sold 1.4 million Android phones.

So, either way you look at it, Palm and webOS are getting further and further behind, and the company runs the risk of becoming just another also-ran in the smart-phone market.

Palm has looked like it was going to be out of the race numerous times before, only to catch a wind and get right back in it. Here's hoping the company's app store relaunch will give it yet another boost. Because webOS is just too nice a platform to have it just fade away.

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