AT&T launching 3 Microsoft-powered phones

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The Windows Phone 7 powered Samsung Focus at the launch of new smart phones with AT&T Inc. ahead of the holiday shopping season, that will run on Microsoft's new mobile software, in New York, Monday, Oct. 11, 2010. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

(AP) -- Microsoft Corp. knows the cell phone world is where it's happening, and it's determined to be a part of it.

After years of declining sales of phones based on Microsoft's Windows Mobile software, the company is starting with a fresh slate - a completely new operating system for phones.

The new handsets will go up against Apple Inc.'s highly popular iPhone and the expanding number of phones running on Google Inc.'s Android operating system.

The first phone with Windows Phone 7 will be the Samsung Focus, which hits AT&T Inc. stores Nov. 8 for $200 with a two-year contract requirement, Microsoft said Monday. It will be closely followed by two more phones for AT&T, made by LG Electronics Inc. and HTC Corp., and one for T-Mobile USA, also made by HTC.

In May, Microsoft launched another new phone software package, Kin, only to yank it about two months later in the face of dismal sales. Windows Phone 7 is a different beast, and Microsoft is putting its full weight behind it.

In all, Microsoft announced nine phones for the U.S. market on Monday, including one from Dell Inc., and it has lined up 60 carriers in 30 countries to carry Windows 7 phones.

Another U.S. carrier, Sprint Nextel Corp., is getting a Windows 7 phones in the first half of next year.

In the most recent quarter, Microsoft's older system, Windows Mobile, accounted for just 5 percent of the worldwide smart phone market. That compares with 41 percent for Symbian (mainly used by Nokia Corp.), 18 percent for Research in Motion Ltd.'s BlackBerry phones, 17 percent for Android and 14 percent for the iPhone, according to research firm Gartner Inc.

From a hardware standpoint, the Windows 7 phones are indistinguishable from high-end Android phones: They have big touch screens, and a few models have slide-out keyboards.

To stand out from the competition, Microsoft has given the software has a different look. It is partly based on the aesthetic from the company's Zune media players. It is centered around "tiles" on the front screen that are supposed to tell the user at a glance about important new information, such as e-mail and Facebook status update.

For example, a weather program might show a constantly updated snapshot of weather conditions; photo or music libraries would be represented by a recent snapshot or the cover of the last album played on the device.

Both the iPhone and Android are fundamentally more application-centered - the user has to tap on an application to see new information. However, some companies including Motorola Inc. have designed overlay software for Android that's reminiscent of Windows Phone 7's information-at-glance idea.

"We want you to get in, get out and back to your life," Microsoft CEO Steven Ballmer said at an event in New York. He called it "a very different kind of phone."

The software is designed to work well with Microsoft's cash-cow Office applications and to connect to Xbox Live, the company's online game service. Early word was that Windows Phone 7 would not support copying and pasting of text, but Microsoft announced Monday that the feature would be introduced through a software update early next year.

To make Windows Phone 7 a success, Microsoft has to win over not just phone manufacturers and phone companies, but software developers. The iPhone and Android are popular in part because of the tens of thousands of tiny applications, or "apps," made by outside software developers.

Although there are tens of thousands of applications written for Windows Mobile, they won't work on Windows Phone 7, so Microsoft has to recruit a whole new base of developers. Those developers may not want to devote the resources to build programs for another smart phone system until it gains traction with users. Microsoft showed off apps from game publisher Electronic Arts Inc. and the Internet Movie Database on Monday, but a broader base of developers will be crucial.

Shares of Microsoft, which is based in Redmond, Wash., gained 3 cents to $24.60 in afternoon trading Monday.

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