

Hopes high for Microsoft's new smartphone platform

October 15 2010, By Mark W. Smith

Microsoft took the wraps off of its [Windows Phone 7 line of smartphones Monday](#), beginning a push that the software giant hopes will maintain its relevance in an increasingly mobile world.

The shift away from desktop computing has forced Microsoft to move onto a platform -- smartphones -- that, to date, it has failed to capture.

And the three powerhouses -- Apple's iPhone, Research in Motion's BlackBerry and Google's line of Android-based smartphones -- aren't exactly leaving much room for a fourth party.

Fully understanding that it will be hard to compete in such a crowded marketplace, Microsoft's announcement emphasized that its Windows Phone 7 handsets will be unlike any on the market.

In a risky move, the home screen will shun apps and instead feature constantly changing blocks of information that Microsoft is calling tiles. The tiles will show things such as recently uploaded [Facebook](#) photos, current weather conditions and frequently used contacts.

The tiles are reminiscent of some of the manufacturer-specific [widgets](#) that have been created for Android-based phones.

SEVERAL MANUFACTURERS

At first glance, the Windows Phone 7 interface looks similar to the Kin,

a line of smartphones aimed at teens that Microsoft killed this summer after just 48 disappointing days on the market.

The Kin's downfall was its proprietary interface -- a bizarre software bundle that asked users to adapt to an entirely new way of navigating around the phone.

The new Windows phones will be completely different creatures, with more powerful under-the-hood hardware, including better cameras and faster processors.

Like Google's Android operating system, Windows Phone 7 will be available on smartphones from a variety of manufacturers, including Samsung, Dell, LG and HTC.

New Windows phones from [T-Mobile](#) and AT&T are expected by mid-November. Others including Verizon plan to carry handsets next year.

GEARED TO GAMING

Microsoft has smartly made gaming a centerpiece of the new phones, relying on the strong reputation of its Xbox console.

The phones will carry a version of Xbox Live, Microsoft's online gaming system, that will allow players to sync games with other phones and PCs.

At the outset, an impressive list of games will be available, including popular titles like "Guitar Hero," "Flight Control" and "Bejeweled."

The phones will come with a mobile version of Internet Explorer and will include support for editing Microsoft Office documents.

Microsoft currently holds 10.8 percent of the [smartphone](#) market,

according to the most recent numbers from tracking firm comScore. BlackBerry's operating system accounted for 37.6 percent, Apple 24.4 percent, and Android 19.6 percent.

APP HAPPY?

The million-dollar question for these Windows phones is whether app developers will embrace the new platform.

While Microsoft is quick to say the phone's success won't hinge on the quality of apps, we know from the instantly popular iPhone and the surging Android phones that smartphones are only as good as the apps made for them by third-party developers.

If app developers don't see a value proposition, they won't spend time creating content for it, sending customers to Apple or Android.

And for the platform to see any success, it will have to quickly amass an army of subscribers, something few companies other than Microsoft could do.

But it's possible.

Appearing on "Today" Monday morning, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer was visibly uncomfortable each time host Matt Lauer asked for comparison's to the [iPhone](#).

"Right now, we're pushing forward, and that's the key is to push forward and to do things a little differently than the other guys," Ballmer said.

Comparisons are inevitable, though, and the horse race will be covered at length as the [Windows Phone 7](#) handsets hit the market next month in time for holiday shopping.

For Microsoft's sake, we can only hope Ballmer is a good jockey.

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