

Android, iPhone competitors wage weak battle

December 22 2010, By Troy Wolverton

In the smart phone business, the conventional wisdom is that everyone is battling for third place behind Google and Apple.

But after listening to briefings from some of their competitors, I'm beginning to think [Google](#) and Apple may soon have the market to themselves. In other words, in the not-too-distant future, your choices of a smart phone may well be an [iPhone](#) or one running Google's [Android](#) - and that's it.

At the D: Dive Into Mobile conference in San Francisco earlier this month, representatives of Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard and [Research In Motion](#) were brought on stage to talk about their companies' smart phone strategies. But under questioning from the hosts and the audience, none could articulate a clear or persuasive case for how their platforms will survive the coming shakeout.

Take Joe Belfiore, a corporate vice president at Microsoft who oversees the company's Windows Phone 7 software, which hit store shelves early last month. When asked how well devices using the software are selling, Belfiore declined to give any sales figures. When pressed to do so, he said it was "too soon to talk about sales numbers." He added that Microsoft was "getting good feedback" from its customers.

Microsoft, of course, has no obligation to release its Windows Phone sales figures, and Belfiore, as a midlevel executive, may not even be authorized to give them out. But his silence spoke volumes. You better

believe that if Windows Phone 7 was seeing blockbuster sales, he would have trumpeted the fact.

Sales figures aside, Belfiore was just plain unconvincing when it came to explaining how Microsoft planned to make Windows Phone 7 devices competitive. Conference host Walt Mossberg noted that despite coming to market more than three years after the iPhone, Windows Phone 7 still comes up short, lacking features such as [multitasking](#) and copy-and-paste. Belfiore's response was to note that Windows Phone lets users take pictures without having to unlock their phones, something they couldn't do on many other devices.

While that's a nice feature, it's not at the top of most smart-phone customers' wish lists.

HP's webOS, which it acquired when it bought Palm, appears to be in even bigger trouble than Windows Phone 7. I loved webOS when I tested it out, but Palm struggled to establish it in the marketplace and largely failed to lure software developers to the platform. Questioned about what happened to Palm, HP executive Jon Rubinstein, who was Palm's CEO before it was acquired by HP, said that the smart-phone market evolved much faster than Palm expected. Palm was too small and didn't have enough resources to respond quickly, he added.

I buy that. But I didn't buy his next line, which is that HP, with its size and scale, "will take webOS to the next level."

WebOS isn't even at the level it was a year ago-it's a non-factor in the market. All the excitement that Palm and Rubinstein generated when they debuted the software last year is gone.

When HP eventually releases new webOS devices - and Rubinstein declined to give a time frame - it will need to completely relaunch the

platform to get anyone interested. In the meantime, with the rapid development and growth of Apple's iOS and Google's Android, webOS is falling farther and farther behind.

Rubinstein tried to talk up the merits of the HP acquisition, but I remain unconvinced that the computer giant is the right company to resurrect webOS. HP keeps talking about using webOS in its printers but shows no urgency to get out new smart phones or tablets running the software.

If Rubinstein was unconvincing, Mike Lazaridis, co-CEO of Research In Motion, was just plain incoherent. Lazaridis touted RIM's new PlayBook tablet and the software underlying it, an operating system called QNX that RIM acquired earlier this year. QNX, a secure, reliable operating system that can run on chips with multiple processing cores, will allow BlackBerry to make a leap forward in [smart phones](#) when such processors become available for them, he said.

QNX may well be great software. But I'm baffled by why its ability to run on multicore processors will help RIM's upcoming QNX devices stand out in the smart-phone market. There's every reason to believe that most of the major smart-phone operating systems are going to be available on phones with multicore processors in the near future. In fact, Andy Rubin, who heads Google's Android effort, has already been talking about multicore Android phones.

As for RIM's legendary security, that just isn't the distinguishing feature it once was. Driven by executives and employees who want to use the phone of their choosing, iPhones and Android devices are already making significant headway in corporate America, though Lazaridis appeared to be in denial about that.

To be clear, I don't expect BlackBerry, [Windows Phone 7](#) or even webOS devices to disappear from store shelves anytime soon. But after

hearing what their chief backers had to say about those platforms, I wouldn't be betting on them for the long term.

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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