

Apple fends off Android challenge with maps, Siri

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Apple said Monday it was revving up the software running its coveted gadgets, training its sights on the China market -- and tossing Google Maps aside in the process.

Apple used its Worldwide Developers Conference (WWDC) to show off upgrades to the software running iPhones, iPads, and iPod Touch devices including its own Siri-infused mapping technology and features tailored for Chinese users.

The hundreds of improvements in the iOS 6 mobile operating system due out before the end of the year come as Apple seeks to outdistance rivals powered by Google's Android software.

Apple chief Tim Cook kicked off the California company's annual WWDC by showing off new capabilities built into software for its hot-selling devices and slimmer, more powerful MacBook laptop computers.

Apple booted Google Maps from iOS 6, opening up another front in the war with the maker of the Android operating system.

Apple's new operating system for the iPhone and iPad includes "an entire new mapping solution from the ground up, and it is beautiful," Apple's Scott Forstall told the standing-room only crowd in San Francisco.

"We are doing all the cartography ourselves. We are covering the world."

Apple has "ingested hundreds of millions of business listings around the world," he added, and has integrated with the consumer review service Yelp for reviews and ratings.

Although Maps does little to generate revenues directly, it often links to searches for products and services such as restaurants or businesses.

"You can now do local search even in China," said Forstall, who added that an array of new iOS 6 features was tailored for that country.

Analysts say the Apple maps program could over time move iPhone and iPad users away from Google search and reduce revenues for the search giant.

"Make no mistake, with maps and some expanded Siri features, Apple is now in the search business," said analyst Greg Sterling on the technology blog Search Engine Land.

Google last week beefed up its maps program, which had been pre-installed on Apple devices.

Apple said that iOS 6 will also include a better-educated Siri personal assistant, which performs many of the search functions of Google.

"Siri has been out only eight months," Forstall said.

"In these eight months Siri has been studying up and learning a lot more."

Siri, which made its debut with the release of the iPhone 4S, will be extended to recent generation iPad tablet computers, according to Forstall.

Another improvement to the iOS will be to incorporate Facebook in the operating system.

"We have been working very closely with Facebook to create the best Facebook experience ever on a mobile device," Forstall said.

Apple also pulled back the curtain on slimmer, more powerful Macintosh laptops.

The move keeps Apple, which has been dominating the market for tablet computers like the iPad, in the game against a new line of slimmer laptops using Microsoft Windows or the Google Chrome operating system.

"Today we've updated the entire MacBook line with faster processors, graphics, memory, flash storage and USB 3 connectivity," said Philip Schiller, Apple's senior vice president of worldwide marketing.

The MacBook Air is as thin as 0.68 inches (1.7 centimeters) and weighs as little as 2.38 pounds (1.08 kilos). Its price starts at \$999.

Improved models will see a boost in speed and memory and cost \$100 less than previous versions.

The high-performance MacBook Pro will include the "Retina" display used on the new iPads, giving an extra high resolution screen.

"With a gorgeous Retina display, all flash architecture and a radically thin and light design, the new MacBook Pro is the most advanced Mac we have ever built," Cook said.

Prices start at \$1,399.

The new MacBook Pro is "a screamer of a machine," according to Gartner analyst Van Baker.

"Apple is doing some amazing things with the notebook form factor," Baker said. "It is a shame to see Apple is the only notebook manufacturer doing innovation as opposed to driving costs down."

Improvements to the software powering Macintosh computers included dictation technology so that "wherever you can type you can now talk," according to Apple senior vice president of software Craig Federighi.

Apple was also "really improving our Chinese input method" with a better dictionary, special fonts for characters, and support for search engine Baidu and other major Internet services in that country, Federighi said.

"Get your apps ready for China," he told developers.

The new Mac operating system, called Mountain Lion, will be in new machines and available as an upgrade next month for a price of \$20.

Equity Research managing director Trip Chowdhry summed up the Apple announcements as "nice refresh, but no breakthroughs."

"I'm totally impressed, mostly on the software side of things," said independent software developer Carlos Oliva, who traveled from his hometown on the Chilean coast to attend WWDC.

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