Apple gives beta users a peek at OS X Yosemite

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Apple is no longer afraid of the word "beta."

Breaking with its notorious code of secrecy, Apple is letting users test-drive its new operating system for the Mac before it is officially launched later this fall. For the first time, the Cupertino, Calif.-based company unveiled a free beta version of its upcoming OS X Yosemite software to the general public late last month along with a parallel version for developers that was updated Monday, setting the Apple blogosphere afire.

Users often get to test new services from Google before they are

finalized, but it's a rare perk from Apple, which typically limits its beta releases to registered developers. By giving the public an early look at Yosemite, Apple is showing a greater appreciation for beta testing, said Carolina Milanesi, chief of research and head of U.S. business at Kantar Worldpanel ComTech, a consumer research firm.

"It may be a bit of a different Apple," she said, adding that the company now seems to understand that releasing a beta version "doesn't say that their attention to detail has changed. ... It's just that they are seeking feedback."

With beta testing, companies can deploy users to spot kinks in software before it debuts. After the troubled 2012 launch of Apple Maps, which set off a deluge of user complaints and forced an apology from CEO Tim Cook, Apple may be trying to avoid another "gotcha" moment, said analyst Van Baker with Gartner Research.

"This is sort of taking advantage of, in essence, the crowdsourcing approach to understand, 'Is there anything we missed?'" he said.

Apple last released a beta version of its software to the public in 2000, and users had to pay for it. The Yosemite beta program is open to the first million people who sign up, though users must consent to a nondisclosure agreement.

Apple released a beta version of its upcoming iOS 8 software for iPhones and iPads to developers after the Worldwide Developers Conference in June, but the company has not opened up the software to the public.

The public beta program will also provide valuable feedback to the developer community, which Apple needs to keep happy as Google's Android operating system gains ground, said Milanesi.

"From a developer perspective, there's an opportunity to deliver better products," she said.

Among other new features, the OS X Yosemite for Macs will allow users to begin a task on one Apple device and finish it on another, Apple has said. The iOS 8 system for iPhones and iPads will give developers new tools to create health and fitness apps.

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