

BlackBerry returns to biz user roots with new smartphone

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A woman holds the BlackBerry Passport smartphone at a launch event in London on September 24, 2014

BlackBerry on Wednesday unveiled its newest smartphone with a full physical keyboard and a large screen, aiming to return to its roots targeting business users.

The BlackBerry Passport, named for its approximate size to the travel

document, is designed to win back key corporate users after the struggling Canadian company was effectively knocked out of the highly competitive consumer smartphone market dominated by Apple and Samsung.

The Passport, unveiled at events in London, Dubai and Toronto, is the company's first global launch of a new product under chief executive John Chen.

Chen admitted, however, that it had already been in the works before he took over last November, after the company posted massive losses and shed thousands of jobs.

His contribution, he quipped, was that "I didn't kill it."

The smartphone is "packed with power" and "a lot of groundbreaking stuff," Chen added at the Toronto launch that included an appearance by hockey legend Wayne Gretzky.

"I've been from day one a BlackBerry user," Gretzky declared onstage.

Key features include a full keyboard, up to 30 hours of battery life, new productivity apps, a 1440-by-1440 pixel screen with 60 characters per line to make it closest to reading a paperback novel, a "virtual assistant" with voice-recognition, and a speakerphone with "louder, clearer and sharper sound" than the competition.

The company's turnaround strategy, Chen reminded, is going back to the basics: "enterprise, security, collaboration and communication."

The new handset caught the attention of analysts with its quirky design and high-end specifications.

"The Passport looks ridiculous & I expected it to be awful. Instead I was shocked by how good it is for productivity," tweeted Avi Greengart, who follows the industry for the research firm Current Analysis.

Greengart added that the Passport "is not a good standalone phone, and its shape makes it a strange second phone. But it can be worth it."



BlackBerry's new Passport device is on display at a launch event in Toronto on Wednesday, Sept. 24, 2014. (AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Chris Young)

The Passport is the third of four new phones to be launched by

BlackBerry this year, after a budget Z3 smartphone was launched in Indonesia (one of its last bastions), and a Porsche-designed phone sold in Dubai.

Chen commented on the luxury phone: "A lot of rich people love it."

The Z3 was the first to be produced from the Canadian firm's partnership with Taiwanese tech giant Foxconn, which also makes gadgets for Apple.

The partnership involved transferring manufacturing and inventory management to the Taiwanese company, while allowing BlackBerry to focus on software and services.



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The upcoming BlackBerry Classic—which will be similar to the Passport—will be launched "between now and the end of the year," Chen said.

The Passport, using the updated BlackBerry 10.3 operating system, will be priced at \$599 without a contract in the United States—slightly below the contract-free price of Apple's new iPhone and high-end smartphones from Samsung.

It will be released in stores within two weeks, after devices on the BlackBerry 10 platform failed to gain traction last year.

The company is scheduled to release its second quarter results on Friday, which are expected to show BlackBerry slowly climbing back from the brink.

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