

Cyanogen CEO Kirt McMaster sees big future for Android rival

May 21 2015, by Troy Wolverton, San Jose Mercury News

Kirt McMaster can be a bit brash as when he told Forbes magazine earlier this year that his small Palo Alto, Calif., startup is "putting a bullet through Google's head."

But his bravado is of a piece with his bold vision to build and market a mobile operating system to rival Google's Android and Apple's iOS. That's something others have tried and failed to do, but Cyanogen, McMaster's company, is offering something that other operating system rivals have lacked: A platform that is based on and fully compatible with stock Android.

For McMaster, the key difference between Cyanogen and Android is that his software can tightly integrate non-Google apps. Last month, for example, Cyanogen announced a deal with Microsoft to build services such as Bing, Skype and OneNote into its software, something that would be unthinkable with Google's version of Android.

McMaster spoke with the San Jose Mercury News last month about his ambitions for Cyanogen and the company's relationship with Google. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What's your business opportunity?

A: It's pretty straightforward: Five billion-plus Android devices in five years; 50 percent or greater of those devices are not going to be Google Android devices; therefore you have a 2 billion-plus market gap to be

filled. We think we can capture a big piece of that. That's bigger than the entire smartphone market today.

I think there's a several-hundred-billion-dollar opportunity in the non-Google Android space over the next five years. We intend to capture as much of that as we can.

Q: But you're building on Android. How can that be all that distinct from Google's version?

A: We offer many different features and enhancements and better security and all that good stuff. Soon you will start to see new experiences on Cyanogen that are different from stock Android and iOS.

You can already see some of these things. We just did an integration with Boxer for email. We're working with Nextbit. But you'll start to see things over the next couple of quarters on our platform that are radically different than on any other Android platform.

Q: Cellphone manufacturers have tried to distinguish their Android phones by creating their proprietary distinct apps and interfaces. Why would they choose instead to offer Cyanogen-based devices?

A: Because they're terrible at software and services and they know it, and they're failing with it. A lot of the people who run Cyanogen do it because it gets rid of the Samsung crap they have on their device.

Q: From a manufacturer's perspective, what is the advantage of going with Cyanogen over straight Google Android?

A: Economics. We provide revenue on services in a way that others do not. We believe that what we're doing will create more revenue, more income, better economics for all the parties.

Q: Given Google's efforts to take more control over Android, and the direction you want to move in, are you worried that at some point Google might cut you off?

A: No. Everything that's in the existing developer agreements, we abide by.

There's a big non-Google platform that Google supports. It's called iOS. Why do they support it? Because they have hundreds of millions of users. The same will be the case with us. I don't think Google is going to want competing services to be the default services and not be there. That would be a huge mistake for Google.

I think that as we continue to grow, Google will continue to support us, and we want to continue to work with Google. I use Google services. Everybody in this company does, and so do our users. And we'd love to figure out ways that Google services can actually do things on our platform that they couldn't possibly do on their own platform with some of the other partnerships we're working with.

Q: What are some of the things Google might be able to do with your platform that it couldn't do with its own?

A: There are a lot of companies that would never provide a certain level of data to Google for fear that it would continue to make them stronger and create greater lock-in. So as we open up Android, we become more of a Switzerland. We think that we will probably be better at sharing data with partners that would never share that data with Google.

The flip side of that is if we continue to have a constructive relationship with Google, they will get to participate in all of the benefits that we can bring to the table that they may be challenged to create for themselves.

Q: Where are the biggest potential markets for Cyanogen?

A: Right now, it's India. It's really shaping up to be the next China.

But Cyanogen is all over the world. We're in the U.S., Canada and India and Indonesia, etc. Right now, almost every Android enthusiast uses Cyanogen. So there's no market that we're not interested in.

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Kirt McMaster

Age: 46

Birthplace: Nova Scotia, Canada

Position: CEO

Previous jobs: CEO, Syn; managing director, Evolver; management consultant, Sega of America; co-founder, Boost Mobile

Education: Attended Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia

Family: In a relationship

Residence: Palo Alto

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Five things about Kirt McMaster

1. Collects Japanese Okimono tiger figurines.

2. Grew up on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, Canada.
3. Enjoys going to Korean spas and Russia banyas or saunas.
4. Is an avid practitioner of Kundalini yoga.
5. Years ago on a phone call, tricked Stephen Spielberg into believing he was Steve Jobs.

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