Apple opens up Siri, other systems to woo developers

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Apple says it is opening up its Siri digital assistant to outside applications, enabling iPhone users to connect with non-Apple services to send messages, make payments, and search photos

Apple said Monday it was opening up its Siri digital assistant to outside applications, stepping up its artificial intelligence efforts to compete against rival services from Amazon, Google and Microsoft.

The new feature will enable iPhone users to connect with non-Apple services to send messages, make payments and search photos.

"Now you'll be able to tell Siri 'send a WeChat,'" said Apple vice president Craig Federighi, referring to the Chinese messaging application.

Federighi said Siri will also work with apps such as Slack, WhatsApp, Uber and Lyft.

The announcement at the kickoff of Apple's annual developer conference in San Francisco marks a new approach for Apple, which has largely kept its leading services self-contained on the iOS mobile operating system.

The new feature will debut on the iOS10 operating system expected later this year.

Also opening to outside developers will be the Apple Maps application, which had a rocky debut marked by glitches in 2012, and the iMessage platform.

This will mean that iPhone users navigating with Apple Maps can, for example, make a restaurant reservation using a third-party service such as Open Table, said Apple vice president Eddy Cue.

By opening up its messaging platform, Apple will also developers to create anything from silly "stickers" to payment programs within iMessage, ramping up competition against Facebook Messenger.
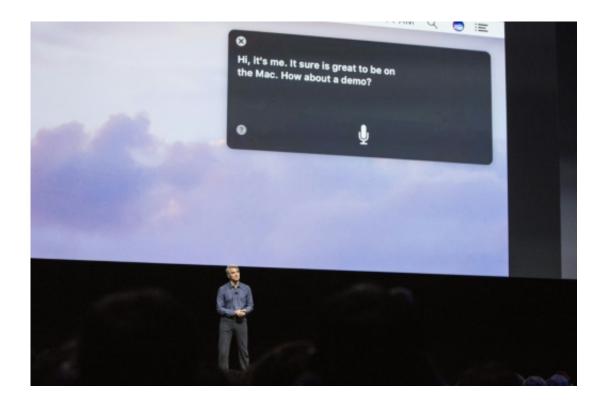
Apple's AI push

The announcements come with Apple aiming to move deeper into

services amid slowing sales of its profit-leading iPhone, and a weak tablet market that has hurt sales of its iPad.

Apple also announced it was bringing Siri to its Mac computer system, allower users of the PCs to search their machines or the Internet with voice commands.

Craig Federighi, Apple's senior vice president of Software Engineering, introduces the new macOS Sierra software at an event at the Worldwide Developer's Conference on June 13, 2016 in San Francisco, California

The moves expand the footprint for Siri, which is facing increased competition from Microsoft's Cortana, Amazon's Alexa and Google Now, which also use artificial intelligence.

"In some ways, the star of the show wasn't a particular product but Apple's refutation of accusations that it can't compete with Google and Facebook in artificial intelligence and deep learning," said Jan Dawson of Jackdaw Research in a blog post.

"Apple has been accused of being behind in this area, and also of being handicapped by its privacy stance, but its on-stage demos today showed that it's capable of competing effectively regardless."

Dawson said the changes to Siri "should make it substantially more useful and effective as an assistant, and keep it competitive with alternatives from Google, Amazon and others."

Patrick Moorhead of Moor Insights & Strategy agreed that Apple appears to flexing its deep learning muscles.

"Opening up Siri will make an enormous effect on the experience," Moorhead said.

"I don't see anything Google can do that Apple cannot, and they're doing it with the highest levels of privacy, which is unique. It's apparent Apple has been working on this for a long time and in many ways, appears ahead of where Google is with their developers on an intelligent agent."

Separately, Apple said it was expanding its Apple Pay system to the Web, allowing merchants to handle transactions which can be authenticated on a user's iPhone or Apple Watch.

Federighi said Apple Pay would be expanded "in the coming months" to more markets including France, Hong Kong and Switzerland.

For the Apple TV platform, the company said it now has some 1,300 video channels and 6,000 apps, and unveiled an upgraded voice search

capability through Siri.

Apple added the Sling TV service, which includes a low-cost bundle of live channels as an alternative to cable or satellite.

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