

Apple adds keyboard touch functions to Mac in major refresh

October 27 2016, by Brandon Bailey



Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks during an announcement of new products Thursday, Oct. 27, 2016, in Cupertino, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Apple's high-end Mac laptops are getting a touch-sensitive strip above the keyboard, as the company aims to spark consumer interest in a product line that's often overshadowed by newer gadgets like the iPad and iPhone.

The new Touch Bar in the long-awaited Mac updates replaces the old function keys on a traditional laptop, offering a variety of controls that change according to the app or website that's open. It also has functions that will be familiar to many iPhone users—showing word suggestions as you type, for example, or letting you scroll through a library of emojis.

Along with faster processors and brighter screens, Apple's new laptops will have a fingerprint sensor, similar to the one on its iPhones. The sensor can unlock the device or recognize a different user and quickly switch to that person's settings. It works with Apple Pay, so users can authorize an electronic payment for online purchases.

NEW FEATURES, HIGHER PRICE

At least for now, the new Touch Bar and Touch ID features will be available only on higher-end models—a 13-inch MacBook Pro starting at about \$1,800 and a 15-inch MacBook Pro at \$2,400. Apple also introduced a \$1,500 13-inch MacBook Pro without the Touch Bar, but with other improvements. Apple will continue to sell older, less expensive MacBook and MacBook Air laptops.

The company unveiled the laptops at its headquarters, where executives showed how the Touch Bar works with a variety of apps and software—providing playback and editing controls for videos or music, for example, and search functions for Apple's maps and photos apps. Apple is also opening the Touch Bar to work with outside software, including Adobe's Photoshop editing program and Microsoft's Word, PowerPoint and Skype.



Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks during an announcement of new products Thursday, Oct. 27, 2016, in Cupertino, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

In keeping with recent updates to other Apple products, the company is also replacing some computer ports with new outlets compatible with USB-C standards. They can be used both for charging and transferring data. Connectors with USB-C technology can transmit data faster than older USB jacks. They are also smaller and have a symmetric shape, which means the USB-C jack can be inserted with either side facing up. But older USB printers and other devices will need adapters.

LAPTOPS VS. TABLETS

The changes to the Mac are the first significant ones in years. Sales of the Mac have been in a slump this year, after a streak of growth in 2014

and 2015 that seemed to defy global trends. Consumers generally are buying fewer PCs and using smartphones or tablets instead.

Apple itself has promoted its latest iPad tablet, the iPad Pro, as a device capable of replacing the laptop for many users. And in contrast with the Mac's earlier years—when Apple marketed its computers to people who saw themselves as creative professionals or just independent thinkers—Apple has begun promoting the Mac as a computer for businesses that once mostly used competitors' PCs running Microsoft's Windows software.

Microsoft, meanwhile, has begun selling its own line of high-end Surface laptops and this week introduced its first Surface desktop PC. Like the iMac in years past, analysts say the new Surface machine has a premium price and features that will most likely appeal to visual designers and other creative professionals. Microsoft has boasted about modern controls with touch screens; the Touch Bar is Apple's answer to that, placed near the keyboard where people's fingers are already.

For Apple, the Mac line has been eclipsed financially by other products—first the iPod and now the iPhone—that have made far more money in recent years.



Apple CEO Tim Cook speaks about Apple TV during an announcement of new products Thursday, Oct. 27, 2016, in Cupertino, Calif. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

Apple sold \$22.8 billion worth of Macs in its past fiscal year, although that was just 11 percent of the company's total revenue. It sold \$136 billion worth of iPhones. In the most recent quarter, Apple sold 9.3 million iPads and 4.9 million Macs, although the iPads accounted for just \$4.3 billion in sales while the Macs contributed \$5.7 billion.

But the Mac has remained a significant product for Apple, since co-founder Steve Jobs introduced the first model in 1984, and it commands intense loyalty from fans. "The Mac is more than a product to us. It's a testament to everything we do and everything we create at Apple," CEO Tim Cook said Thursday.

BABY STEPS IN TV

Cook also used the event to promote a newer endeavor, Apple TV, and a new unified menu feature that shows recommendations and recently watched shows, so viewers don't have to search through different apps to find them. Amazon's Fire TV is taking a similar approach with a software update, though the unified experience will be part of the home screen, not an app.

Apple's app, though, is short of a full-fledged streaming-TV service, which reports say Apple has been pursuing. Rather, it brings together TV shows and movies viewers already get through individual subscriptions. The TV app will be synced with iPhones and iPads, so viewers can catch the next episode regardless of device. Apple said its Siri voice assistant will also direct viewers to live events, such as streaming sports.

Apple said Apple TV already has 8,000 apps, including more than 2,000 games. The addictive building game "Minecraft" will come later this year.

In a minor setback, meanwhile, Apple said Wednesday that it's delaying shipment of its new wireless earphones, called AirPods, which had been scheduled for late October. In a statement, the company said, "We don't believe in shipping a product before it's ready, and we need a little more time before AirPods are ready for our customers." Apple didn't elaborate.

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Citation: Apple adds keyboard touch functions to Mac in major refresh (2016, October 27)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2016-10-apple-keyboard-functions-mac-major.html>

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