

New smart speaker expected as Apple kicks off conference

June 5 2017, by Michael Liedtke



In this Wednesday, Dec. 7, 2011 file photo, a person stands near the Apple logo at the company's store in Grand Central Terminal, in New York. Apple appears poised to unveil a voice-activated, internet-connected speaker that would create a new digital pipeline into people's homes. Tapping Apple's Siri digital assistant, such a speaker is expected to serve as a butler as well as an outlet for listening to music. If the speculation pans out, the speaker would be Apple's first new product since its smartwatch in 2015, Sunday, June 4, 2017. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Apple appears poised to unveil a voice-activated, internet-connected speaker that would create a new digital pipeline into people's homes.

Tapping Apple's Siri digital assistant, such a speaker is expected to serve as a butler as well as an outlet for listening to music. If the speculation pans out, the speaker would be Apple's first new product since its smartwatch in 2015. And it would mark an effort by Apple to catch up with Amazon and Google.

An early glimpse at updates to iPhone and Mac software has become a tradition at Apple's annual conference for app developers, which begins Monday in San Jose, California. But Apple occasionally also uses the event to introduce new devices and services and upgrades to existing products.

Amazon introduced the Echo speaker, featuring its Alexa assistant, in 2015. Google followed with its Home speaker, featuring its plain-named Assistant, last year. Both speakers can respond to voice requests for the news, weather and tasks such as turning on the lights.

More than 35 million people in the U.S. are expected to use a voice-activated speaker at least once a month this year, more than doubling from last year, according the research firm eMarketer.

"There is so much momentum building around these speakers that it would be difficult for Apple not to come out with one," said industry analyst Patrick Moorhead of Moor Insights & Strategy.

Amazon just unveiled a version of Echo with a camera, touch-screen display and video-calling capabilities. The new Echo Show goes on sale on June 28 for \$230. Google, meanwhile, previewed new speaker features such as hands-free phone calling during its software conference last month. Microsoft also has announced its own speaker with

Samsung's Harman business; it will use Microsoft's Cortana digital assistant.

That leaves Apple. Although it was the first smartphone maker to come out with a digital assistant when Siri debuted in 2011, it hasn't had a stand-alone assistant. For Apple, having one would further broaden the role that its software, services and gadgets play in people's lives.

It wouldn't be the first time that Apple hopped on the bandwagon of a technology product popularized by a competitor. For instance, Apple initially resisted enlarging the size of iPhone's screen despite strong sales for larger-display phones made by Samsung and other rivals. But the company relented, and Apple's larger phones have become hot commodities as more people have embraced having a bigger display to look at pictures and watch video on the devices.

Although Siri would likely be a centerpiece of a smart speaker from Apple, Moorhead said the device's design, colors and acoustics will also likely be focal points because the company has a long history of making elegantly designed products.

The lack of a breakthrough device has periodically raised concerns that Apple has become too dependent on the iPhone and supported the theory that the company lost its knack for innovation when its co-founder Steve Jobs died of cancer in 2011. Although Apple Watch has emerged as the leader in its technological niche, it hasn't become a smash hit like the iPhone or the iPad—at least until tablet sales started declining.

On the software front, RBC Capital analyst Amit Daryanani expects the iOS 11—the next operating system for Apple's iPhones and iPads—to get an overhaul that will accommodate the anticipated removal of the home button from the 10th anniversary model of the iPhone due out later this year. The next iOS may also have new features designed for

artificial intelligence, the application of computers that learn and understand things like humans.

Apple also may introduce its next Mac computer, along with the next operating system powering the machine. Software updates are also expected for Apple's smartwatch and TV box for streaming online video. Daryanani said Apple may also announce an iPad Pro with a faster processor in an attempt to revive its long-slumping tablet sales.

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