

Pixel smartphone upgrade highlights Google push into hardware (Update)

October 4 2017, by Glenn Chapman



The Google Pixel 2 and Google Home Mini. Credit: Google

Google on Wednesday unveiled new versions of its Pixel smartphone, the highlight of a refreshed line aimed at weaving artificial intelligence deeper into modern lives.

Google software and artificial intelligence were common threads in the gamut of new devices it unveiled to step up its challenge on the hardware

front to rivals such as Apple and Amazon

The new Pixel 2 and larger Pixel 2 XL are the first Google-made phones to be released since the California tech giant announced the acquisition of key segments of Taiwan-based electronics group HTC.

The upgraded smartphones will be available for order as of Wednesday in six countries starting at \$649 for five-inch display Pixel 2, and \$849 for the six-inch Pixel 2 XL.

The new aluminum-body smartphones along with Google's upgraded connected speakers and new laptop computer all aim to infuse artificial intelligence to make the devices more user-friendly, built around the Google Assistant—the rival to Amazon's Alexa, Microsoft's Cortana and others.

Google vice president Rick Osterloh said Google's new devices "are simple to use and they anticipate your needs."

Osterloh told the product launch event in San Francisco: "You interact with your devices naturally with your voice or by touching them."

Google, by bringing in a team of engineers from HTC, aims to emulate the success of Apple iPhones by controlling the hardware as well as the software used in the premium-priced handsets.

The revamped camera in the smartphone retains a single lens, but seeks to improve images via "computational photography," an artificial intelligence tool that can enhance pictures.

Analyst Ian Fogg of IHS Markit said in a tweet that the new smartphone "adds incremental improvements on the great v1" while noting that "Google's challenge is to solve production limits which hurt the original."

Fogg said the use of computation to improve images with a single lens "is technically impressive."



The Google Pixel 2 XL. Credit: Google

Mini speaker, mini camera

Google announced a slimmed down version of its connected speaker called Google Home Mini starting at \$49 in the United States, stepping up its challenge to market leader Amazon.

The new Google Home Mini is available for pre-order in the seven countries where the device is offered, and will go on sale in stores October 19, the company said.

The new speaker, which responds to voice commands using artificial intelligence, is less than half the price of Google's first generation speaker and makes this "more accessible to more people," said Google hardware designer Isabelle Olsson.

A premium version of the speaker—a \$399 Google Home Max unveiled Wednesday—offers more power and audio quality for music aficionados.



Mario Queiroz, vice president of product management at Google, introduces the Pixel 2 and Pixel 2 XL smartphones at a product launch event in San Francisco

The new Google Clips camera—one of the surprises of the event—"looks for smiles (and) moments, because the software is in the camera," said Google product manager Juston Payne.

"It's like having my own photographer shooting and choosing my best moments for me," Payne said of the \$249 device.

Another surprise from the event was the wireless Pixel Buds, which can deliver audio from a smartphone and also include the Google Assistant and real-time translation.

A demonstration at the event included a two-way conversation with one person speaking English and the other Swedish.

"The camera and the earbuds were really held up as examples of what the company can do by leveraging the Google Assistant," said Ross Rubin of Reticle Research.



Google unveiled a suite of devices including new versions of its Google Home digital assistant powered by artificial intelligence

A new Pixelbook laptop was touted as a "high performance" computer powered by its Chrome operating system and designed as a rival to Microsoft's Surface and Apple's iPad Pro.

With a 12.3-inch display, the device is a convertible PC that can be used as a tablet and is sold starting at \$999 for US customers.

'AI-first world'

Google chief executive Sundar Pichai said the new devices showcase the tech giant's artificial intelligence.

"We've been working hard continuing our shift from a mobile-first to an AI-first world," he said.



Isabelle Olsson, lead designer for home hardware for Google, , introduces the new Google Home Mini

"We are working on software and hardware together, because that is the best way to drive computing forward."

The launch comes in the wake of Apple's announcement of a new line of iPhones, and Amazon's upgrades to its Echo speakers powered by its Alexa digital assistant

"It is a portfolio designed to take Google into more parts of your life, particularly in your home," Reticle Research analyst Ross Rubin said of the array of devices the internet giant unveiled on Wednesday.

"Amazon is focusing on a range of price points and designs; Google is focusing on a range of experiences."

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