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This Week's Stories

T-Mobile And Sprint's Long Rumored Merger May Not Be Announced Until 'Mid Or Late November'

October 20, 2017

The wait goes on, anticipation will continue to build, and the US wireless "duopoly's" disruption still needs time to "finalize details."

According to "people familiar with the matter" speaking with Bloomberg again on the typical condition of anonymity, T-Mobile and Sprint's all-stock merger is unlikely to go through by the time the two cellular companies are expected to separately reveal their latest quarterly financial results.

Of course, "go through" may not be the best way to put it, as this oft-delayed announcement of the two's intentions to join forces against Verizon and AT&T will have to be supported by approval from industry regulators for any deal to ultimately get settled.

It's unclear exactly what's holding up the important first official step in a consolidation effort that's been many years in the making. Current negotiations are rumored to have started months ago, and for the most part, the terms seem etched in stone.

Still, if T-Mobile and Sprint will indeed release solo earnings reports with no formal mention of an impending union towards the end of the month, "several weeks" might then go by without the highly anticipated merger agreement gaining official confirmation.

Another theory is the third and fourth largest US mobile operators will postpone their respective earnings calls until the final details of this deal are decided sometime in mid or late November. Either way, there's no telling when or if the FCC will ever give the green light.

pocketnow.com

State's Are So Eager To Win Amazon's HQ2 They're Offering The Company As Much As \$7 Billion

October 19, 2017

U.S. cities are offering Amazon as much as \$7 billion in tax breaks ahead of a Thursday deadline as they compete to house its second headquarters.

The world's largest online retailer has won promises from elected officials who are eager for the \$5 billion-plus investment and up to 50,000 jobs that will come with "Amazon HQ2."

New Jersey proposed \$7 billion in potential credits against state and city taxes if Amazon locates in Newark and sticks to hiring commitments, according to a Monday news release from the governor's office.

Across the Hudson River, New York City made a proposal without incentives special for Amazon, though the state is expected to offer some, a spokesman for the city's economic development corporation said on Wednesday.

And across the country, California is offering some \$300 million in incentives over several years and other benefits, the governor said in an Oct. 11 letter to Amazon's Chief Executive Jeff Bezos, published online by the Orange County Register.

Dozens of cities and states have expressed interest in HQ2. Credit ratings and research company Moody's has ranked Austin as the most likely to win based on its labor pool, costs of doing business and quality of life, among other criteria.

Austin is also the headquarters of Whole Foods Market, which Amazon recently acquired. The city's chamber of commerce said in a Twitter post on Wednesday that it submitted its bid for HQ2.

Amazon has said it will announce a decision for its second campus, in addition to its Seattle headquarters, next year.

[cnbc.com](#)

Viacom And Charter's Spectrum Reach Programming Deal

October 17, 2017

Viacom Inc and cable operator Spectrum have agreed on a multi-year programming deal that keeps Nickelodeon, Comedy Central and Viacom's 21 other networks in 16.6 million households, the companies said on Tuesday.

"Viacom and Charter have reached an agreement in principle. Spectrum subscribers will continue to have access to Viacom's networks, without disruption, while we finalize terms," the companies said in an emailed statement.

Viacom and Spectrum, which is owned by Charter Communications Inc, reached the deal after negotiations that prompted Viacom to run TV ads urging viewers to call Spectrum to complain about a potential blackout. Viacom CEO Bob Bakish, who took on his role last year, has made improving relations with distributors a key part of his turnaround strategy for the company. Like its peers, Viacom is struggling to keep viewers as more people watch shows on smartphones and tablets. Six of the largest U.S. pay-TV providers lost a total of 723,000 subscribers during the second quarter. Of that total, Charter reported 90,000 subscriber losses.

[reuters.com](#)

Products & Services

Microsoft's Answer To Amazon Echo Will Be Available Soon

October 20, 2017

The Harman Kardon Invoke, Microsoft's answer to Amazon Echo and Google Home, will be available October 22, the companies said Friday.

That's not a moment too soon. Microsoft is playing catchup to Amazon's two-year-old Echo, which as of last month has sold an estimated 15 million units, and Google Home, a distant second in sales. Invoke gets its voice recognition smarts from Microsoft Cortana.

With Cortana also embedded in its Windows 10 operating system, Microsoft is banking that integration with its Office 365 applications will make Invoke attractive for the many people who use Office at work. They can ask Invoke, for example, to check their Outlook calendars, and create

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"They can ask Invoke, for example, to check their Outlook calendars, and create reminders without pulling out a PC or phone."

reminders without pulling out a PC or phone. Cortana can also run on Apple iPhones and Android devices, although it is unclear how much traction it has had beyond the Microsoft ecosystem.

Microsoft is also collaborating with HP on another Cortana-based speaker and with Johnson Controls on a “Nest”-like thermostat.

This is a crucial market for Microsoft, says Constellation Research analyst Holger Mueller. Microsoft needs data from people’s kitchens and living rooms as well as their offices. Amazon Echo’s success aside, the home assistant market is still in its infancy in his view.

There is yet another big shoe to drop in this space with Apple slated to make its HomePod device, which combines high-quality audio with voice commands, available in December.

There will be lots of “oohs and aahs” when HomePod debuts, Mueller said but the Microsoft ecosystem is bigger than Apple’s ecosystem. “Invoke’s connection with Windows 10 PCs and the data on them is the potential and is why Microsoft is far from out of this market.”

These smart connected speakers, also known as virtual personal assistants, are part of a white-hot market for connected home devices. Microsoft, Amazon, Google, and Apple all want consumers to use their respective technology to control connected gadgets, from smart lights and thermostats to audio-video gear. And they all gather data about user behavior and preferences from interactions with the devices, which helps them fine tune their own AI technologies. The potential misuse or sharing of that data is something that worries privacy advocates.

Invoke lists for \$199.95 and be available starting October 22 at Best Buy and Microsoft Stores as well as from HarmanKardon.com.

fortune.com

Panasonic Unveils Global Wireless Network

October 19, 2017

Japanese electronics giant Panasonic on Tuesday introduced a new wireless network that will be available in 180 countries and comprise the first global service of its kind.

Devices that connect to the P.180 network can roam across most international borders without accumulating charges, utilizing data, or losing access to LTE connectivity.

“When you travel in a part of the world like Europe or even Southeast Asia, for example, where countries are more geographically smaller and compacted together, you’re changing service networks every time you cross a different border,” Victoria Obenshain, vice president of Panasonic System Communications Company of North America, said at a press conference in Manhattan. “We want to understand the business case so we can develop the appropriate solutions that are going to create market pull, but truly address problems. We’re not into throw-away technology or ‘build it and they will come’ type formats.”

The P.180 network is primarily geared toward businesses, with the hope of maintaining the near-constant communication enjoyed in offices during international travel. The service could also help ease business costs for roaming and data.

“When we started in the wireless business in 1997, we thought we understood where it was going to take us, but the market, demand curve, and wants of our customers shifted as they started to understand how critically important real-time connectivity is,” Obenshain said. “Cellphones, laptops — we cannot live without having instantaneous connections to information. It’s how we live our

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“The P.180 network is primarily geared toward businesses, with the hope of maintaining the near-constant communication enjoyed in offices during international travel.”

personal and business lives, not to mention the convergence between the two always happens. So I think five years from now, we'll look back at this unveiling and realize this was the springboard for us to look at connectivity in a different way than we have in the past 20 years."

Panasonic also hopes to expand the network beyond its current capabilities, which include 92 percent of the world's countries.

"We're constantly under negotiations. At 180 countries, it doesn't mean you stop negotiating with one carrier in each country," said Cubic Telecom CEO Barry Napier, whose company spent years developing the P.180 network with Panasonic. "It really comes down to the applications for customer requirements. There could be a requirement or application that needs a specific network in a specific area, and based on them and customer solutions, we'll go and have those negotiations."

wirelessweek.com

Samsung Connect Tag Will Track Your Kids, Pets, Or Valuables

October 16, 2017

Worry about losing something important, like your keys, pet, or kid? Samsung wants to help give you peace of mind.

The company on Monday unveiled Connect Tag, a small, cellular-connected fob that lets you keep track of loved ones and valuables. Samsung said this is the first consumer mobile product to use narrowband technology (aka NB-IoT or Cat.M1), a "specially designed cellular communication standard for small data utilization, low power consumption, and the ability to securely connect to the Internet for optimal location services."



Samsung is planning to initially launch the Connect Tag in Korea before expanding it to additional countries in the coming months.

The device works with GPS, Wi-Fi-based positioning, and Cell ID technologies to fetch location information both indoors and outdoors. Measuring just 4.21 cm wide and 1.19 cm thick, Connect Tag is water and dustproof and lasts a full week on a single charge.

"It can be attached to a young child's backpack so his or her whereabouts can be tracked, clipped to a dog's collar so it won't go missing, and secured to keys so they are never lost," Samsung wrote in a news release.

It also works with Samsung's SmartThings ecosystem to enable some cool, futuristic experiences. You can, for instance, set up your Connect Tag to trigger specific smart devices like lights or your TV to

turn on when you approach your home. Or, you can set up a geo-fence around your kid's school so you get a notification on your phone when they arrive or leave that area.

The device will send "periodic location notifications," letting you track your loved one's location record for peace of mind. There's also a "Send my location" function that lets your loved one easily beam you their current location. This way, "even a young child can let you know exactly where he or she is and [you] can go pick him/her up safely," Samsung wrote.

pcmag.com

Emerging Technology

Romeo Power Unveils Its First Consumer Power Packs

October 19, 2017

Romeo Power has just announced what looks to be the mobile charging device of my dreams.

Its wand-shaped "Saber," using the company's proprietary power management technology, is a compact little charger that seems ideal for keeping my three-year-old, busted-up MacBook running when I'm on the go.

My computer shuts down within five minutes if it's separated from an outlet, which means I can't reap the only benefit of my blogging existence... working from anywhere (Malibu beaches, I'm looking at you). At least, that was the case until I saw my Romeo (power pack that is).

The company was founded by engineers and designers from SpaceX, Tesla, Samsung, Apple and Amazon, and the personal power pack they designed uses the same technology the company has raised \$30 million to roll out for electric vehicles and stationary battery packs.

"Saber is like having a wall socket in your pocket," touts Dion Isselhardt, the company's chief design officer and the former senior director of design at Samsung's Strategy and Innovation Center.

The charger offers 86 watt-hours of power, charges fully in two hours and can recharge most laptops two times. It can charge a tablet two-to-four-times and a phone more than 10 times, the company said. In outlet-empty, coffee shop-rich cities like Los Angeles, where would-be scribblers would ideally like to spend hours tap-tap-tapping away on the next big screenplay, these chargers could be a blessing (for restaurants and coffee shops... not so much).

The only other battery packs I've seen come close are ChargeTech's, which retail for \$249 and are a little bulkier in design. Other battery packs offer a lot of the same charging capabilities, but size and the AC adapter (for Macs) set the ChargeTech and Romeo Power batteries apart (in my book).

The power pack features a Variable AC, USB-C and two USB ports for charging any device that's less than 90 watts — anything from a drone to DSLR camera to a 15-inch 85-watt MacBook Pro. The thing can also charge four devices at once with no other accessories required. It clocks in at a fairly hefty 2.2 pounds, but given the power it's packing, that's not a large price to pay for the convenience it offers.

As a bonus, the charger is FAA- and TSA-approved, dust proof and water-resistant (I'm looking closer at you, Malibu beaches). There's also the battery pack's power management technology, which recognizes different devices and auto-adjusts output for rapid charging. The device will come in blue, red, or black and retails for \$299 with a pre-order price of \$199.

techcrunch.com

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"The charger offers 86 watt-hours of power, charges fully in two hours and can recharge most laptops two times. It can charge a tablet two-to-four-times and a phone more than 10 times, the company said."

New Neural Network Teaches Itself Go, Spanks The Pros

October 18, 2017

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“So the people at DeepMind decided to make a Go-playing AI that could teach itself how to play.”

While artificial intelligence software has made huge strides recently, in many cases, it has only been automating things that humans already do well. If you want an AI to identify the Higgs boson in a spray of particles, for example, you have to train it on collisions that humans have already identified as containing a Higgs. If you want it to identify pictures of cats, you have to train it on a database of photos in which the cats have already been identified.

(If you want AI to name a paint color, well, we haven't quite figured that one out.)

But there are some situations where an AI can train itself: rules-based systems in which the computer can evaluate its own actions and determine if they were good ones. (Things like poker are good examples.) Now, a Google-owned AI developer has taken this approach to the game Go, in which AIs only recently became capable of consistently beating humans. Impressively, with only three days of playing against itself with no prior knowledge of the game, the new AI was able to trounce both humans and its AI-based predecessors.

In a new paper describing their creation, the people at the company DeepMind contrast their new AI with their earlier Go-playing algorithms. The older algorithms contained two separate neural networks. One of them, trained using human experts, was dedicated to evaluating the most probable move of a human opponent. A second neural network was trained to predict the winner of the game following a given move. These were combined with software that directed them to evaluate possible future moves to create a human-beating system, although it required multiple computers equipped with application-specific processors developed by Google called tensor processing units.

While the results were impressive enough to consistently beat top human players, they required expert input during the training. And that creates two limitations. The algorithm can only perform tasks where human experts already exist, and they're unlikely to do things that a human would never consider.

So the people at DeepMind decided to make a Go-playing AI that could teach itself how to play. To do so, they used a process called reinforcement learning. The new algorithm, called AlphaGo Zero, would learn by playing against a second instance of itself. Both Zeroes would start off with knowledge of the rules of Go, but they would only be capable of playing random moves. Once a move was played, however, the algorithm tracked if it was associated with better game outcomes. Over time, that knowledge led to more sophisticated play.

Over time, AlphaGo Zero built up a tree of possible moves, along with values associated with the game outcomes in which they were played. It also kept track of how often a given move had been played in the past, so it could quickly identify moves that were consistently associated with success.

Since both instances of the neural network were improving at the same time, the procedure ensured that AlphaGo Zero was always playing against an opponent that was challenging at its current skill level.

The DeepMind team ran the AI against itself for three days, during which it completed nearly five million games of Go. (That's about 0.4 seconds per move). When the training was complete, they set it up with a machine that had four tensor processing units and put Zero against one of their earlier, human-trained iterations, which was given multiple computers and a total of 48 tensor processing units. AlphaGo Zero romped, beating its opponent 100 games to none.

Tests with partially trained versions showed that Zero was able to start beating human-trained AIs in as little as a day. The DeepMind team then continued training for 40 days. By day four, it started

consistently beating an earlier, human-trained version that was the first capable of beating human grandmasters. By day 25, Zero started consistently beating the most sophisticated human-trained AI.

And at day 40, it beat that AI in 89 games out of 100. Obviously, any human player facing it was stomped.

So what did AlphaGo Zero's play look like? For the openings of the games, it often started with moves that had already been identified by human masters. But in some cases, it developed distinctive variations on these. The end game is largely constrained by the board, and so the moves also resembled what a human might do. But in the middle, the AI's moves didn't seem to follow anything a human would recognize as a strategy; instead, it would consistently find ways to edge ahead of any opponent, even if it lost ground on some moves.

This doesn't mean that DeepMind has crafted an AI that can do anything. To train itself, AlphaGo Zero had to be limited to a problem in which clear rules limited its actions and clear rules determined the outcome of a game. Not every problem is so neatly defined (and fortunately, the outcomes of an AI uprising probably fall into the "poorly defined" category). And human players are treating this as a reason for excitement. In an accompanying perspective, two members of the American Go Association suggest that studying the games played among the AIs will give them a new chance to understand their own game.

arstechnica.com

Mergers and Acquisitions

Wal-Mart Nears Deal To Add Lord & Taylor To Its Website

October 19, 2017

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. is near a deal to add Lord & Taylor to its website, part of a broader effort by the retail giant to build an online shopping destination that can compete with Amazon.com Inc., according to people familiar with the matter.

Wal-Mart, seeking to ramp up e-commerce sales after years of sluggish growth, wants to turn Walmart.com from a discount site into an online mall that would also feature higher-end brands, the people said. For Lord & Taylor, the alliance could bring a boost in web traffic at a time when fewer shoppers are visiting department stores.

Additional brands that eventually could be included in the project include men's clothing company Bonobos and online retailer Jet.com, both of which are owned by Wal-Mart, as well as other traditional chains, one of the people said. Financial terms of the potential Lord & Taylor partnership couldn't be learned.

Last year, Wal-Mart bought Jet, placing its founder Marc Lore at the head of U.S. e-commerce operations. Then Wal-Mart made a series of smaller e-commerce purchases including Moosejaw, Bonobos and ShoeBuy, both to expand its online selection and gain access to brands built online, executives have told investors.

Now Wal-Mart aims to make Walmart.com more attractive to premium brands and high-income shoppers, an area Amazon has also pursued in recent years.

marketwatch.com

Apple and GE Partner to Make Industrial Analytics iOS-Accessible

October 18, 2017

“Predix software takes data from sensors embedded in all kinds of industrial equipment used in the energy industry and uses that data to predict maintenance downtime more efficiently.”

GE and Apple announced a partnership today that will pave the way for putting utility analytics software Predix on iOS devices. The Predix software development kit will allow 77 utilities that work with GE to manage turbines, condensers, boiler feed pumps, and more from iPads and iPhones.

That, GE says, will ensure “that real-time data is captured and shared with field workers and remote operations using iOS devices.”

As part of the program, GE has agreed to standardize iPhones and iPads as the primary work devices for its 330,000 employees. The industrial machinery company will also make Macs available to employees who prefer them, according to Reuters.

Predix software takes data from sensors embedded in all kinds of industrial equipment used in the energy industry and uses that data to predict maintenance downtime more efficiently. This isn't a novel idea—power plant and utility operations generally require some form of diagnostic system to avoid the kinds of catastrophic failures that cause, at best, money to be lost and, at worst, power outages to customers. Some equipment managers have home-grown systems tailored specifically to the machinery configuration that exists at their power plant. And other big companies like Siemens offer third-party diagnostic tools like GE.

Last month, GE announced that it would begin using Predix in its remote monitoring center in Atlanta, Georgia, where the company watches power plant equipment running in 60 countries from a distance. The system gets feedback from one million sensors set in industrial equipment, and when any of those sensors sends back data outside of their preferred parameters, the M&D (that is, monitoring and diagnostics) center can call the owners of those assets and recommend a solution.

The system gives power plant owners some advance notice about potentially critical conditions, hopefully turning unplanned downtime into planned downtime (which is always cheaper for the power plant owners). Similarly, Siemens also has remote monitoring centers, much like GE's center in Atlanta, in Europe and Orlando, Florida.

In a call with Ars last month, Scott Bolick, head of software strategy and product management for GE Power, called GE's remote M&D center with asset management diagnostics the “largest industrial Internet of things use case in the world.”

GE's software will now be more accessible for customers using iOS devices. The Predix SDK launches on October 26, and GE told Reuters that it expects the partnership to help its digital arm pull in \$12 billion in revenue.

In a press release, GE contextualized the partnership: “A Predix app on iOS can notify a worker on their iPhone of a potential issue with equipment like a wind turbine and allow them to collaborate with remote teams when performing inspections and repairs, collecting relevant data instantly,” GE wrote.

“These industrial apps will close the information loop faster, ultimately increasing cost savings and minimizing unplanned downtime.”

arstechnica.com

Industry Reports

Verizon Sees More Signs Of Pay-TV Cord Cutting

October 19, 2017

"The telecom giant add 66,000 Fios broadband customers, while losing 18,000 Fios video customers during the July-September third quarter, the company said Thursday."

Verizon provided more evidence that consumers continue to opt for broadband-delivered TV offerings such as Netflix and Amazon Video over traditional pay-TV service.

The telecom giant add 66,000 Fios broadband customers, while losing 18,000 Fios video customers during the July-September third quarter, the company said Thursday. Overall, Verizon now has 5.8 million Fios broadband customers and 4.6 million Fios Video customers.

Verizon's decline in video subscribers follows AT&T's report last week in a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission that it had lost 90,000 video subscribers during the third quarter. That loss would have been larger had AT&T not added 300,000 new subscribers on its DirecTV Now broadband-delivered TV service.

Similarly, Comcast has forecast it will report losses of as many as 150,000 subscribers during the July-September period when it releases its Q3 financials next week.

"There's nothing new here in terms of the trends we have been seeing over the past few years around whether it's cord cutting or cord-nevers or whatever else," said Verizon chief financial officer Matt Ellis in a conference call after the company released its earnings results. "Two or three years ago, we really started speaking about the fact the traditional linear tv bundle is not long-term sustainable. ... We are not surprised."

The trend here goes beyond Verizon alone as the number of homes with broadband Internet service is expected to hit nearly 100 million this year, up from 97.6 million last year, according to The Diffusion Group. The number of broadband homes has surpassed those with pay TV service, the research firm estimates.

Overall, Verizon posted mixed third-quarter results. Net income of \$3.62 billion remained flat compared to the same period last year and fell short of expectations of \$3.96 billion, based on analysts polled by S&P Global Market Intelligence. Adjusted earnings of 98 cents per share beat expectations of 97 cents.

Revenue of \$31.72 billion rose 2.5% and beat expectations of \$31.44 billion.

Verizon, the nation's largest wireless provider, added 603,000 wireless customers including 486,000 smartphones, compared to 242,000 in the same period a year ago. Accounting for departing subscribers, Verizon added 274,000 net wireless phones, as well as net tablet additions of 91,000 and 238,000 other connected devices including wearables.

Overall, Verizon has 115.27 million wireless subscribers. The company's results "were largely as expected," thanks to lower-than expected churn rates and slightly better than expected wireless service revenue, said Evercore ISI analysts Vijay Jayant and James Ratcliffe in a note to investors Thursday.

Verizon (VZ) shares rose 1.4% in midday trading Thursday to \$49.35. Shares are up about 4% over the past 12 months.

usatoday.com

Netflix Shares Hit Record After Adding More Subscribers Than Expected

October 16, 2017

Netflix Inc added more subscribers than expected around the world in the third quarter and projected growth in line with Wall Street forecasts, saying it had a head start on rivals as internet television explodes globally.

Shares of the world's leading online video streaming service touched a record high on Monday and rose a further 1.2 percent after hours to \$205.07. They are up about 64 percent this year.

For the third quarter, Netflix added 5.3 million subscribers in all its markets, compared with Wall Street's target of 4.5 million, according to FactSet. Netflix forecast 6.3 million additions for the current quarter, just above analysts' average estimate of 6.25 million, which would bring its global customer base to nearly 115.6 million.



The company known for original TV shows such as "House of Cards" is spending heavily to produce and acquire content as it races to dominate streaming television in international markets, which now account for the majority of its subscriber growth.

In its quarterly letter to shareholders, Netflix said it would boost its content budget to between \$7 billion and \$8 billion in 2018.

"As we move into 2018, we aim to achieve steady improvement in international profitability and a growing operating margin as our success in many large markets helps fund investments throughout Asia and the rest of the world," the letter said.

Investors have been bullish on Netflix's ability to keep signing up customers around the world despite new rivals. Netflix recently traded at 101 times expected earnings for the next 12 months, versus Amazon.com Inc at 144 times earnings and Time Warner Inc at 16 times earnings, according to Thomson Reuters data.

The company faces increasing competition from streaming services such as Amazon.com's Prime Video, plus moves by traditional media companies. Walt Disney Co decided to yank its first-run movies from Netflix in the United States starting in 2019, and to launch its own online offering.

Netflix, in its investor letter, said Disney's decision underlined the need to keep building its slate of exclusive original content. "We have a good head start but our job is to improve Netflix as rapidly as possible," the company said.

But Hastings said on a webcast it was "extremely unlikely" that Netflix would bid on The Weinstein Company if the opportunity arose. The film production company is in talks to sell the bulk of its assets to Colony Capital following the firing of co-founder Harvey Weinstein.

Netflix distributes some Weinstein Company movies and TV shows on its streaming service but the business is not material, Netflix Chief Creative Officer Ted Sarandos said on the webcast.

Netflix's 5.3 million additional subscribers in the third quarter included 4.45 million in international markets and 850,000 in the United States. Wall Street had expected 4.5 million overall, with 3.69 million overseas and 810,000 in the United States, according to FactSet.

Revenue rose about 30 percent to \$2.99 billion in the third quarter.

Net income rose to \$130 million, or 29 cents per share, in the latest quarter from \$52 million, or 12 cents per share, a year earlier.

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