Weekly Wireless Report

Week Ending:
March 3, 2017

KS&R Data to Knowledge

Inside This Issue:

This Week's Stories
Snap Shares Soar In Market Debut For Parent Company Of Snapchat

Amazon Broke The Internet With A Typo

Products & Services
Uber Plans To Turn Its App Into A 'Content Marketplace' During Rides

YouTube Unveils YouTube TV, Its Live TV Streaming Service

Emerging Technology
Sharp Vision: New Glasses Help The Legally Blind See

Mergers & Acquisitions
Verizon To Pay $4.48B For Yahoo In Discounted Deal After Security Breaches

Yelp Acquires Restaurant Waiting List Tech Startup Nowait In A $40 Million All-Cash Deal

Samsung Paid Around $215 Million For Virtual Assistant Startup Viv

Industry Reports
What MWC 2017 Tells Us About The State Of The Mobile Industry

BlackBerry Is No Longer A Phone Company

This Week's Stories

Snap Shares Soar In Market Debut For Parent Company Of Snapchat

March 3, 2017

Snap, the parent company of the ephemeral messaging service Snapchat, outstripped expectations for its stock market debut Thursday, closing at $24.48 per share. That means the social network once thought of mostly as a tool for sending naughty pictures is now worth approximately $28 billion -- more than Macy's and American Airlines' as of Thursday.

The IPO was a great success for co-founders Evan Speigel and Bobby Murphy, who founded the company in 2011 out of their Stanford University dorm rooms. Now both are billionaires before the age of 30.

The company saw a healthy pop in its first moments of trading, opening at $24 -- roughly 40 percent higher than the company's price of $17 per share, and far higher than the company's original $14-$16 range.

The higher trading price demonstrated the great demand Snap had for its initial public offering. Some are hoping that Snap's debut can revive a lagging IPO market, as Barron's reported, and encourage other tech firms to make their debuts.

Experts said the excited reaction to the Snap debut could easily nudge firms on the fence about going public into the market. "If you're anywhere within the neighborhood of going public, you might as well go and catch some of the money that people are throwing around," said Rob Enderle, principal analyst at Enderle Group, who compared the excitement over an unprofitable company to the heady days of the dot-com boom.

While Snap had a fairly successful debut, the question now is whether it can keep that momentum. In the long-term, will Snap look more like a Facebook, a Twitter, or will it carve its own path?

Social media firms that have gone public have had checkered success. Facebook recovered from a glitch-marred debut -- it closed at its opening price of $38 -- and initial skepticism about its ability to make money by creating a mobile advertising behemoth. Twitter, on the other hand, closed well above its $26 IPO price at $44.90. But it has disappointed investors worried about its growth and lack of revenue; on Thursday it closed at $15.49 per share.

Some analysts say Snapchat's appeal, and particularly its engagement numbers, justify its valuation and make it a good candidate for succeeding more in the vein of Facebook -- which famously tried to buy the network for a now paltry looking sum of $3 billion in 2013.

Snapchat supporters point to the company's loyal user base of 158 million people, who use it to send 2.5 billion messages every day, according to the company's regulatory filings. While Snap has yet to profit off that popularity, it is growing its revenue, which was $404.5 million in 2016, a substantial increase from the $59 million it logged in 2015.

The firm has invested substantially in working with media partners, including The Washington Post, to deliver news and analysis to its predominately young audience. Its growth has, to this point, also been largely driven by younger users in the coveted 18-35 demographic, who spend more than 30 minutes on it per day, according to the company's filing.

Those bullish on Snap say that it's mastered the art of meeting its audience where they are. "Snap Inc. has figured out how to capitalize on the short attention span of younger generations and to create meaningful engagement experiences with friends, family and even celebrities and brands," said Greg Ng, VP of Digital Engagement at the social media consultancy PointSource.

But other analysts caution that Snap looks decidedly Twitteresque -- at least for now.

James Gellert, chief executive of the analysis firm Rapid Ratings said, Snap is in a weaker position at this point in its development than Facebook, which has had considerable post-IPO success. When it comes to Snap's financials and its vision for the future, he said, it has far more in common in Twitter at the point of IPO than Facebook.

The company hasn't turned a profit, for example -- and has cautioned that it may never make a profit. It also hasn't articulated a clear path to how it will continue to make money. In fact, Gellert noted, Snap has said that it actually expects to spend more money in the coming years to continue growing.

Snap also runs some risk of getting the wind taken out of its sails by competitors as analyst Brian Wieser of Pivotal wrote in a research note to investors. He assigned Snap a "sell" rating and said he assessed its value at $1o per share. "It has a promising and innovative advertising offering, but so far it is still mostly unproven and difficult to quantify its ultimate scale," he said. It's also competing with enormous companies for advertising dollars, he said, particularly highlighting Facebook and Google.

Facebook -- and its sibling network, Instagram -- poses a particularly strong challenge. Analysis from the research firm 7Park Data suggests that the launch of Instagram's Snapchat-like Stories feature hurt Snapchat's growth. Snapchat's daily users fell off after Instagram introduced its version Stories, indicating that Snapchat's user base can be lured away.

Gellert, who expected Snap to crackle with a post-IPO pop, said that a good market debut ultimately doesn't tell you much about the company -- just that tech-focused investors are hungry to get their hands on something new. In his eyes, Snap has a way to go to prove itself as a stable investment.

"Snap is relatively young and it's yet to generate profits. The typical IPO tech investor will say that's fine and it doesn't matter," he said. Long-term investors, however, may not be so forgiving.

chicagotribune.com

Amazon Broke The Internet With A Typo

March 2, 2017

The incident that made some of the web inaccessible this week was a result of human error.

Amazon published an explanation about Tuesday's disrupted service of S3, part of Amazon Web Services, which provides hosting for hundreds of thousands of websites and apps.

Turns out, it was a typo.

In a statement on Thursday, Amazon said an employee on its S3 team was working on an issue with the billing system and meant to take a small number of servers offline -- but they incorrectly entered the command and removed a much larger set of servers.

Amazon is "making several changes" to its system to avoid a similar event in the future. Namely, "the tool used allowed too much capacity to be removed too quickly."

According to Synergy Research Group, AWS owns 40% of the cloud services market, meaning it's responsible for the operability of large swaths of popular websites. So if AWS goes down, it takes a huge number of businesses, apps, and publishers with it.

That's why so many sites struggled with slow or reduced capacity during Tuesday's outage. Some news organizations couldn't publish stories, and file sharing was disabled on the enterprise chat app Slack. Other sites impacted include GitHub, Trello, and Venmo. It took Amazon almost four hours to resolve the issue.

"While we are proud of our long track record of availability with Amazon S3, we know how critical this service is to our customers, their applications and end users, and their businesses," the company said. "We will do everything we can to learn from this event and use it to improve our availability even further."

cnn.com

Products & Services

Uber Plans To Turn Its App Into A ‘Content Marketplace’ During Rides

March 3, 2017

“Expanding Trip Experiences to take over your feed is also a natural progression of what Uber has been developing for the past year.”

Uber can’t seem to avoid headlines for the wrong reasons right now, as it gets slammed for its toxic work culture, its connections to a polarizing U.S. President, and its CEO’s attitude to Uber drivers.

But despite all that, the transportation company — currently valued as high as $68 billion — continues to grow and is expanding its business into ever more areas. One of the latest, TechCrunch has learned, involves the app itself.

Uber wants to turn it into a “content marketplace” — a feed of entertainment and other features with potentially dozens of third party content partners, designed to grow engagement in the Uber app itself — going beyond the basics of ordering rides and rating drivers.

According to documents seen by TechCrunch, the marketplace will be based on a new version of Trip Experiences, a smaller feature first launched a year ago with a select group of partners.

In the future, when a user gets into an Uber, the Uber app will turn “into a rich feed of cards,” in the words of Uber itself: a series of third-party apps will provide you with more information about the area or specific place you are going; some entertainment while you’re travelling; work and productivity integrations; and communications with the place where you are going specifically.

The expanded marketplace, according to a presentation, is currently planned for an early April launch.

Uber declined to comment to TechCrunch about its future plans.

Initially, Uber will not charge developers to be a part of the new Trip Experiences feature, according to our source, who was provided the presentation in a capacity as a third-party developer. Another source who talked to TechCrunch said there are no plans for Uber to include advertising in the feed.

However, there are elements of the redesigned Trip Experiences that do appear borrow from world of ad tech, as well as Facebook's app platform. It will include a carousel-like app gallery, where services and apps can be "discovered" by users and connected into the Uber app.

And there is a second option for "re-engagement", which enables apps to submit content into the Uber Feed, if the user already has the app on their phone. This can be used to notify users of the temperature of their smart thermostat while they are on their way home, or show a to-do list while they are headed to work — all within the Uber app.

Uber is also pushing contextual engagement that might, for example, enable a Snapchat user to unlock special stickers or filters, or showcase Instagram searches of the destination they are headed to, or, in the case of Uber Pool rides, show if they share mutual Facebook friends with other passengers (presumably only if you opt in, otherwise this could prove to be a privacy nightmare).

In the case of app showcasing, Uber could provide an opportunity for developers or companies seeking to target an audience of relatively tech-savvy users. (We've created our own images above that roughly show how some of these formats will look, based on images in the presentation leaked to us by a developer.)

Considering all of the above, you can see how a revenue share on transactions, or fee for a content partner to appear in the feed, clearly could become a new business opportunity for Uber if this takes off.

But for now, the idea seems to be something else that Uber is positioning itself as having a wider purpose for its customers, beyond providing basic transportation from point A to point B.

It taps into the fact that Uber has a captive audience (its passengers sitting in vehicles). Uber users have completed over 2.5 billion rides to date, according to the company, with 10 million rides each day across the more than 70 countries and 400 cities where Uber is active.

And it has potentially a very wide reach into the lives of that captive audience. Uber notes that "commute time" in the U.S. alone is 19 hours per month, making it second in time spent only to Facebook and Spotify at 21 hours/month each. Of course, not every commute is an Uber commute — and that is likely another reason for building out Trip Experiences: a useful feed of information, tailored to your ride, gives Uber another way to attract users amid competition from a number of other apps and other transportation options.

Going from A to C(ontent)

Expanding Trip Experiences to take over your feed is also a natural progression of what Uber has been developing for the past year.

Trip Experiences first launched in January 2016 to help Uber users fill dead time while on the move. The feature was originally focused around a select group of content — it included news from the Washington Post and Bay Area hyperlocal blog Hoodline; searching for coffee and internet-friendly cafes near your destination with Cupper and Work Hard Anywhere; podcasts timed to the duration of your journey with Otto Radio; and more.

Uber then expanded some of that in-app activity in November 2016, when an app update brought in a feed to "make the most of your ride" with the ability to browse Yelp and Foursquare; play with Snapchat filters; stream Pandora songs and order Uber EATS to arrive at the same time as you do.

Uber has often been described not as a transportation but a technology company, and the growth of this content marketplace — which theoretically could even be used when you're not even in an Uber vehicle — underscores that. But it also, crucially, can help corral users back into Uber's core transportation business: developers putting content into Uber's feed can also use Uber's "Ride Request Button" API in their own apps to give users the option to book Uber services.

In its pitch to developers, Uber is positioning this content play as one of its four key ways that it can help businesses grow. The other three are rides (by way of that API that lets businesses integrate ordering an Uber directly into their apps); delivery-on-demand via Uber Rush; and "making driving more rewarding" for its drivers — that is, a separate Driver API where developers can build services that target these drivers as customers/users.

The new program will give Uber a way to widen its content partners, but it isn't quite an open door for all. Uber, we understand, is working closely with selected partners who come on to the platform to ensure that what they bring is the right blend of contextual experience or entertainment, so don't expect the Uber app to be overridden with unapproved messages and services. But, if Uber has its way, this could become the next big push to help tie Uber closer to your life.

techcrunch.com

YouTube Unveils YouTube TV, Its Live TV Streaming Service

February 28, 2017

"The service is fairly low-cost, with a family of six accounts available for $35 per month, and no long-term contract required."

After a year of rumors, YouTube is finally drawing back the curtain on its latest play for entertainment industry domination — a live TV service.

At the company's Playa Vista offices, a crowd of roughly 100 journalists settled into tables and chairs arrayed in the company's hangar-like foyer to the strains of "Video Killed the Radio Star" and "Coffee and TV" to hear the news. (Seriously, YouTube's music game is on point).

Distinct from YouTube Red, the new service, YouTube TV, which has been in the works for years at Google's internet video behemoth, has quietly been inking contracts with media companies to distribute their content on its TV service.

As previously reported by The WSJ and Bloomberg News, a steady drumbeat of leaks had already set the tone for what will be offered by the service.

According to Bloomberg, YouTube had been talking with all of the major networks to roll up content. CBS was the first major TV network to sign on to the service, with all of the other studios also roped into discussions including 21st Century Fox, Comcast's NBCUniversal and Disney, which owns ABC, ESPN and others.

Today, YouTube confirmed how its channels will be bundled and priced.

The service is fairly low-cost, with a family of six accounts available for $35 per month, and no long-term contract required. Earlier reports from The Wall Street Journal set pricing for the service somewhere between $25 and $40 per month.

However, it will only launch in markets where it can offer full, live local broadcast feeds, like L.A., New York and Philadelphia.

"We decided to create an offering that would give them all of these can't-miss live moments," said YouTube Chief Business Officer Robert Kyncl of YouTube TV's offering.

He explained that YouTube has partnered with all of the broadcast networks in order to offer "comprehensive national coverage with ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox all included."

In addition, the service is getting CW, USA, FX, FXX, Syfy, FreeForm, MSNBC, CNBC, Fox News, Fox Business, Disney, Disney Jr., NatGeo, Sprout, E! and others. ShowTime is available for an additional fee.

Missing, however, is content from Scripps, Viacom and Time Warner, like HBO.

Kyncl said that could change, as YouTube is “always in conversations” with potential partners.

For sports fans, the service includes national coverage from ESPN/ESPN2/ESPN3/ESPNU, FoxSports, FS1, FS2 and NBC SportsNet. Also offered are regional sports networks from Fox and Comcast, SEC Network, Big Ten and ESPNU. Fox Soccer Plus is available as an add-on.

In addition, YouTube TV includes YouTube Red’s 28 original series. This could make it more appealing to a younger demographic looking for more content than offered by the ad-free subscription offering YouTube Red — a service that was recently impacted by the loss of one of its biggest stars, PewDiePie.

“It’s a testament to the way that YouTube works with partners of all sizes that we’re able to offer up the lineup that we have today,” said YouTube Chief Product Officer Neal Mohan. “We feel we’re in a great position to reinvent the way TV works. No other company in the world has more experience serving high-quality video over the internet, high-def streaming, apps that don’t crash and seamless integration with mobile and web.”

Features: Search, Cloud DVR, Recommendations & Social

YouTube TV will challenge traditional cable TV players by offering a DVR that never runs out of space, and that’s capable of simultaneous recordings. Cloud-based DVRs have become table stakes in the live TV market, as competitors like Sling, Vue and DirecTV Now offer this feature or have it planned.

But YouTube TV will offer each account its own personal DVR, as well as its own tailored recommendations, shown when the app is in portrait mode. These suggestions are personalized based on what you’ve watched and recorded.

When you launch the app, you can explore a visual TV guide, and quickly scan what you want to watch by flicking through channels with your thumb.

The app is separated into three sections — live, library and home. Live is where you’ll find the broadcast content; from here you can tap to watch the show or tap a plus icon to begin recording. At any time, you can “cast” YouTube TV’s content to your television, as you can with Chromecast.

Search is available, as well, including the ability to search by themes, like “time travel,” for example, which would return TV shows and movies where time travel is integrated into the plot.

You also can command YouTube TV by voice, thanks to integration with Google’s connected speaker product, Google Home. (The company attempted to demo this on stage, but it failed.)

If the product gets buggy — something that’s often the case at the launch of new streaming products — you can text or voice chat with customer service from the app.

Social is integrated into YouTube TV, too, with the “community” tab previously introduced on top creators’ channels becoming a part of YouTube TV’s service.

Both Google and the networks will sell the ads on the service, Google said. And everything on the service is ad-supported, unless you subscribe to YouTube Red and are watching YouTube (not network TV) content.

How Far Can The Over-The-Top Market Expand?

YouTube TV is launching into a crowded and highly competitive landscape that's now filled with internet TV services.

Beyond the top on-demand players, Netflix, Amazon, Hulu and HBO NOW, there's a host of live TV services, including Dish's Sling TV, Sony's PlayStation Vue, AT&T's DirecTV Now and, soon, Hulu, which is launching a live TV service of its own.

Of course, unlike its rivals, YouTube already has traction: This week, the company announced people watch 1 billion hours of YouTube per day.

But in terms of internet TV services, it will face a different type of competition. Early pioneer Sling TV has already grown to a million subscribers, according to analyst estimates released this fall, and, despite some early glitches, its numbers continue to climb. Like YouTube TV, it also offers a base package that can be combined with add-on bundles personalized to your interests. The company just slashed the prices of those add-ons, too, likely in an attempt to defer customers from leaving for YouTube.

Meanwhile, AT&T's DirecTV Now was so buggy at launch that customers began filing complaints with the FCC in order to get refunds. Yet, the company still managed to acquire 200,000 subscribers in its first month, without impacting its rivals' growth, according to Sling TV CEO Roger Lynch. Instead, he said the newer arrival expanded the market for over-the-top services with its entry.

With YouTube today bringing even more attention to the streaming TV market, the question now is whether this will be the tipping point where the number of competitors outpaces the growth of the over-the-top market itself.

YouTube TV will be available to U.S. customers in select markets on web, Android and iOS in the months ahead. The company is taking sign-ups on its homepage now.

techcrunch.com

Emerging Technology

Sharp Vision: New Glasses Help The Legally Blind See

March 2, 2017

"The headsets from eSight transmit images from a forward-facing camera to small internal screens -- one for each eye -- in a way that beams the video into the wearer's peripheral vision."

Jeff Regan was born with underdeveloped optic nerves and had spent most of his life in a blur. Then four years ago, he donned an unwieldy headset made by a Toronto company called eSight. Suddenly, Regan could read a newspaper while eating breakfast and make out the faces of his co-workers from across the room. He's been able to attend plays and watch what's happening on stage, without having to guess why people around him were laughing.

"These glasses have made my life so much better," said Regan, 48, a Canadian engineer who lives in London, Ontario.

The headsets from eSight transmit images from a forward-facing camera to small internal screens -- one for each eye -- in a way that beams the video into the wearer's peripheral vision. That turns out to be all that some people with limited vision, even legal blindness, need to see things they never could before. That's because many visual impairments degrade central vision while leaving peripheral vision largely intact.

Although eSight's glasses won't help people with total blindness, they could still be a huge deal for the millions of peoples whose vision is so impaired that it can't be corrected with ordinary lenses.

Eye Test

But eSight still needs to clear a few minor hurdles.

Among them: proving the glasses are safe and effective for the legally blind. While eSight's headsets don't require the approval of health regulators -- they fall into the same low-risk category as dental floss -- there's not yet firm evidence of their benefits. The company is funding clinical trials to provide that proof.

The headsets also carry an eye-popping price tag. The latest version of the glasses, released just last week, sells for about $10,000. While that's $5,000 less than its predecessor, it's still a lot for people who often have trouble getting high-paying jobs because they can't see.

Insurers won't cover the cost; they consider the glasses an "assistive" technology similar to hearing aids.

ESight CEO Brian Mech said the latest improvements might help insurers overcome their short-sighted view of his product. Mech argues that it would be more cost-effective for insurers to pay for the headsets, even in part, than to cover more expensive surgical procedures that may restore some sight to the visually impaired.

New Glasses

The latest version of ESight's technology, built with investments of $32 million over the past decade, is a gadget that vaguely resembles the visor worn by the blind "Star Trek" character Geordi La Forge, played by LeVar Burton.

The third-generation model lets wearers magnify the video feed up to 24 times, compared to just 14 times in earlier models. There's a hand control for adjusting brightness and contrast. The new glasses also come with a more powerful high-definition camera.

ESight believes that about 200 million people worldwide with visual acuity of 20/70 to 20/1200 could be potential candidates for its glasses. That number includes people with a variety of disabling eye conditions such as macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, ocular albinism, Stargardt's disease, or, like Regan, optic nerve hypoplasia.

So far, though, the company has sold only about 1,000 headsets, despite the testimonials of wearers who've become true believers.

Take, for instance, Yvonne Felix, an artist who now works as an advocate for eSight after seeing the previously indistinguishable faces of her husband and two sons for the first time via its glasses. Others, ranging from kids to senior citizens, have worn the gadgets to golf, watch football or just perform daily tasks such as reading nutrition labels.

Eying The Competition

ESight isn't the only company focused on helping the legally blind. Other companies working on high-tech glasses and related tools include Aira, Orcam, ThirdEye, NuEyes and Microsoft.

But most of them are doing something very different. While their approaches also involve cameras attached to glasses, they don't magnify live video. Instead, they take still images, analyze them with image recognition software and then generate an automated voice that describes what the wearer is looking at -- anything from a child to words written on a page.

Samuel Markowitz, a University of Toronto professor of ophthalmology, says that eSight's glasses are the most versatile option for the legally blind currently available, as they can improve vision at near and far distances, plus everything in between.

Markowitz is one of the researchers from five universities and the Center for Retina and Macular Disease that recently completed a clinical trial of eSight's second-generation glasses. Although the results won't be released until later this year, Markowitz said the trials found little risk to the glasses. The biggest hazard, he said, is the possibility of tripping and falling while walking with the glasses covering the eyes.

The device "is meant to be used while in a stationary situation, either sitting or standing, for looking around at the environment," Markowitz said.

mobile-tech-today.com

Mergers and Acquisitions

Verizon To Pay $4.48B For Yahoo In Discounted Deal After Security Breaches

March 3, 2017

“Like AT&T, Verizon is looking to build a digital media and advertising empire to offset slowing growth in the U.S.”

Yahoo’s massive security breaches will be costly, but they won’t doom an acquisition by Verizon.

Verizon said today that it will spend $4.48 billion to acquire Yahoo’s core business, agreeing to a $350 million discount following two huge cyberattacks on the longtime internet company. The buyout was initially announced in July, but Verizon opted to reopen negotiations after the hacks were disclosed.

The companies also agreed to split “certain legal and regulatory liabilities” due to Yahoo’s security breaches. Yahoo will be responsible for half of any cash liabilities incurred during the closing related to non-SEC government investigations and third-party litigation related to the breaches, and liabilities from shareholder lawsuits and SEC investigations will be the sole responsibility of Yahoo.

“We have always believed this acquisition makes strategic sense,” said Marni Walden, Verizon’s executive vice president of Product Innovation and New Businesses, in a press release. “We look forward to moving ahead expeditiously so that we can welcome Yahoo’s tremendous talent and assets into our expanding portfolio in the digital advertising space.”

The deal is expected to close in the second quarter of 2017.

Like AT&T, Verizon is looking to build a digital media and advertising empire to offset slowing growth in the U.S. wireless market. In 2015 it acquired AOL for $4.4 billion, and more recently it bought the web-video startup Vessel for an undisclosed sum. Meanwhile, it continues to pursue Go90, an OTT video offering aimed at young mobile users.

The Yahoo acquisition would give Verizon 2% of the global digital advertising market in terms of revenue, according to eMarketer, far behind Google at 32% and Facebook at 13%, according to a research note from Wells Fargo Securities.

And whether the nation’s largest wireless carrier can actually gain significant traction in digital media is far from clear. Verizon recently slashed 155 jobs from Go90, which has struggled to find an audience, and its fledgling digital media business generated a mere $532 million minus traffic and acquisition costs in the fourth quarter of 2016.

“We believe the Yahoo assets combined with its AOL business should drive both expense and revenue synergies, particularly when paired with Verizon’s 114 million wireless subscribers,” Jennifer Fritzsche of Wells Fargo Securities wrote in a research note.

“The combined Yahoo-AOL businesses would help diversify Verizon away from its core wireless business, although we would note its digital media and advertising business would still be a small percentage of revenues. Verizon would still be a relatively small player in the digital advertising space after the deal closes.”

fiercewireless.com

Yelp Acquires Restaurant Waiting List Tech Startup Nowait In A $40 Million All-Cash Deal

March 1, 2017

Yelp has acquired restaurant technology startup Nowait in an all-cash deal valued at $40 million.

Founded out of Pittsburgh in 2010, Nowait integrates its technology with that of restaurants to streamline and optimize front-of-house operations, including table turnover and waiting lists.

The company had raised around $22 million in funding since its inception, including a strategic $8 million investment Yelp made in the company back in August. The $40 million Yelp is paying for Nowait includes the stake it already acquired.

The partnership was also designed to enable Yelp users to verify restaurants’ waiting times and start queuing remotely — all without leaving the Yelp app. When a diner’s table is good to go, they receive a message, and the Yelp user can message back to say if they’re running late or whether they’re just a few seconds away. It essentially replaces archaic systems involving handheld buzzers or pieces of paper — now everything happens through a smartphone.

“The full integration of Nowait allows us to provide real-time seating availability that better equips diners to make informed decisions,” said Yelp cofounder and CEO Jeremy Stoppelman, in a press release.

“Nowait has quickly become an important feature for Yelp users and a valuable addition to our overall restaurant offerings. With this acquisition, we’ll make even bigger strides in the restaurant industry by allowing Yelp users to more quickly move from search and discovery to transacting at a local business.”

This acquisition gives Yelp a direct artery into the waiting list setups in thousands of restaurants — Nowait is already live in around 4,000 restaurants across the U.S. and Canada.

“We’ve had a successful partnership and we’re excited to align fully with Yelp to drive even faster adoption,” added Nowait CEO Ware Sykes. “Together we’ll have the leading waitlist system in the restaurant industry paired with the largest engaged consumer base.”

venturebeat.com

Samsung Paid Around $215 Million For Virtual Assistant Startup Viv

February 28, 2017

Samsung has disclosed the terms of its recent acquisition of virtual assistant startup Viv Labs. When Samsung made the deal for 238.93 billion won on October 7, the Korean won was equal to $0.0009, meaning that the price came out to around $215 million.

San Jose-based Viv Labs, whose team built Apple's Siri virtual assistant, is now a subsidiary of Samsung Research America, according to the filing (PDF) from earlier this month. Most of the money was for goodwill, the filing shows. Since the acquisition, Viv Labs has generated a loss of 3,424 million won, or $3.08 million. The startup took on $30 million in funding before being acquired, according to CrunchBase.

Samsung is currently planning to launch the Galaxy S8 flagship smartphone on March 29. The phone will include the Bixby virtual assistant, not Viv, which the startup showed off last year. At the time, Viv could surface information based on voice input, like Siri. The system could also incorporate third-party services like Hotels.com, Uber, and Venmo.

Apple reportedly paid more than $200 million to acquire Siri in 2010. Siri came to the iPhone in 2011 with the launch of the iPhone 4S.

The Galaxy S8 will go head to head with LG's G6, which sports the Google Assistant, just like Google's own Pixel and Pixel XL. Meanwhile, Google is bringing the Assistant onto many more Google devices through the Google App.

Earlier this week, Lenovo unveiled a Moto Mod for the Moto Z that brings Amazon's Alexa assistant to that smartphone. Huawei is reported to be developing a virtual assistant of its own.

venturebeat.com

Industry Reports

What MWC 2017 Tells Us About The State Of The Mobile Industry

March 3, 2017

Mobile World Congress is more than just a product showcase. The event is a handy snapshot for the current state of the smartphone industry, and as with CES, the show's beginning of the year slot is ideally timed to offer a bit a preview of the year to come.

Some trends were hard to miss. 5G was a big buzz word at the event, in spite of the fact that no one is quite sure what it means. Auto companies have made some major headway at the mobile show, perhaps one day rivaling their presence at CES. Retro phones are definitely a thing now, and as is announcing that you'll be making an announcement.

There were a few more worth noting, as well.

The industry has seemingly already moved on from the Note 7: I had two conversations before boarding my flight home from Spain yesterday. One was with the cab driver and the other with the woman behind the airline's front counter. Both brought up the Galaxy Note 7. That's roughly the same amount I heard the phone discussed my entire week at MWC.

Samsung once again made reference to the debacle at the beginning of its press conference, repeating it CES apology along with a somewhat tone-deaf video of the company's super sexy testing facility set to "Give the People What The Want" by the O' Jays. It was a weird choice. LG meanwhile, discussed its rigorous battery safety testing and increased walling to protect accidental contact between positive and negative charges – precisely the problem Samsung encountered with the Note.

It was pretty clearly a thinly veiled swipe at the follow South Korean manufacturer, but companies otherwise seemed to go pretty easy on Samsung in this first MWC since the Note 7 fiasco. The same definitely can't be said for Barcelona's cab drivers.

Smartwatch excitement has died down: Companies haven't exactly been rushing to get back on board with smartwatches. CES didn't offer much from the category, and Huawei had the only notable launch at MWC this week. It's no surprise that brands have been extra cautious as sales have slowed, arguably hitting a saturation point.

But the launch of Android Wear 2.0 earlier this month seeming hasn't inspired much additional confidence, as Huawei this week became the next company to embrace the wearable OS with a new piece of hardware. Perhaps this is confirmation of yesterday's report from IDC that the wearable industry is dying so much as shifting, but as a bell weather for the space at large, this year's MWC didn't seem particularly bullish on the space moving forward.

Smartphone makers are betting big on cameras: Android phone manufacturers have always had trouble distinguishing themselves from the pack, which has certainly contributed to the notion of a mobile specs arms race. These days, cameras seem to be the primary battlefield on which that war is largely waged. Not surprisingly, that was most of what Sony spoke about at its press event. After all, if you're providing the camera tech for much of the rest of the industry, at least you can ensure that your devices get it first.

China's top smartphone maker Oppo even went as far as eschewing a device launch in favor of showing off a dummy prototype of its new camera zoom technology. Photography was also a driving factor in LG's decision to go with a new aspect ratio, allowing users to shoot and preview square photos at the same time.

HDR Is The New 4K: That's pretty much it.

If all else fails, show a prototype: Oppo's big announcement was a technology contained in a black box. Ditto for ZTE, whose own big unveiling, the simply named Gigabit Phone was more proof of concept than anything else, happy muddying the waters in the lead up to 5G with its confusing and difficult to pronounce "5uper Generation" tagline.

Motorola, too, while actually announcing its new G5 handsets, took some wind out of its own sails with a parade of prototypes.

techcrunch.com

BlackBerry Is No Longer A Phone Company

March 3, 2017

"BlackBerry is no longer making any hardware or manufacturing any devices. The company is still selling some phones, but only those that were already built."

Mobile World Congress 2017 concluded on Thursday, but as usual all the devices had been announced on the opening weekend, starting with TCL's BlackBerry KeyOne. Buried in the news of the fourth BlackBerry device running Android was a big change for the company: BlackBerry no longer makes devices; BlackBerry now only makes software. We had the opportunity to speak with Alex Thurber, head of BlackBerry's mobility solutions unit, about the Canadian company's transformation.

Over the past year, BlackBerry's business has increasingly relied on licensing — the division Thurber leads was once called the devices business unit. Now it's the mobility solutions unit. That's right — no more devices. Instead, the unit is responsible for supporting handsets and all other hardware. BlackBerry has largely completed its move to a licensing-only model.

"We're excited how as mobility solutions we fit into the broader BlackBerry story, which is obviously focused on big picture enterprise mobility," Thurber told VentureBeat. "And again, with our licensing ventures I think we're in a great position to move forward. You're going to see a lot more BlackBerries going forward than you have in a long time. Soon our other licensees will start releasing products as well. I think it's going to be a very exciting year for BlackBerry as we really look at re-expanding our move with smartphones."

So the KeyOne is just the first of many BlackBerry-branded devices coming out this year. Instead of devices, the company sees itself offering security and privacy features, specifically making it easier for companies, governments, and individuals to protect whatever information they deem valuable. How will BlackBerry do this without making any actual devices? By focusing on software.

License Out Everything, But Control The Software

BlackBerry has handed all the hardware and sales details to its licensees. The KeyOne is the first BlackBerry phone that BlackBerry isn't pushing itself. The past three devices, the BlackBerry Priv, the DTEK50, and the DTEK60, all went through the BlackBerry distribution chain.

Now, licensees are responsible for selling the BlackBerry-branded phones through their own distribution chains. There's no difference to the end customer, whether it's a business or an individual user, as the devices are still available in retail stores, from carriers, and on the open market. But for carriers and distributors, they'll now work with the licensees, as opposed to with BlackBerry.

BlackBerry is no longer making any hardware or manufacturing any devices. The company is still selling some phones, but only those that were already built. You can no longer buy a new BlackBerry from BlackBerry.

This transition has been ongoing for the last month or so. The BlackBerry distribution chain is finito.

When asked about the demand breakdown for BlackBerry devices (enterprises versus individuals), Thurber deftly explained that it really depends on the market. For BlackBerry, Indonesia is very much a consumer market; India is small business, enterprise, and government; Western Europe is more business than government-focused; and South Africa is a lot of consumers. Although the KeyOne is launching globally, licensees will also be building BlackBerry phones catered to specific regions (announced licensees so far include TCL, BB Merah Putih in Indonesia, and Optiemus in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh).

"They are on the ground, they know exactly what their consumers require, be it individuals, be it companies," Thurber explained. "They are developing the hardware to fit that market at their particular price point and then we're coming in with that software expertise, the BlackBerry brand, and all awareness and positive vibes behind that. I think it's a real winning combination."

The licensee is responsible for coming up with the marketing and branding plan, including the name. Although BlackBerry doesn't design the phone, the company can approve or deny the final design and name.

At the end of the day, BlackBerry has "complete control of the software." Well, Google still makes Android, but BlackBerry offers its software and apps on top, including monthly security patches.

BlackBerry delivers a “signed and sealed software image” for every device with its name on it. The company will also work with the licensee for particular applications that a given market requires.

“There won’t be anything put on the device that we haven’t approved,” a Blackberry spokesperson confirmed with VentureBeat. “Anything else has to be stock downloaded and installed from the Google Play store.”

Never Say Never

Given this new strategy, which has been in the making for over a year, one would think that BlackBerry is entirely focused on software for Android devices and that it will never make hardware again. That would make sense, but the company isn’t quite ready to commit.

When asked where BlackBerry OS fits into all of this, Thurber replied with the same thing BlackBerry has been saying ever since rumors of an Android BlackBerry first arrived: BlackBerry is still supporting BlackBerry OS with regular updates.

That’s right: BlackBerry still employs engineers focused on BlackBerry 10 — the latest 10.3.3 update came out in December 2016. Thurber wouldn’t definitively say there will be no more BlackBerry OS devices, nor would he commit to a future BlackBerry 10 phone. In other words, it’s technically still possible, assuming there’s enough demand from customers.

If a non-Android BlackBerry is released sometime in the near future, however, it will probably be made by a licensee. So, will we never see a BlackBerry-sold phone again?

“I’m always cautious in the technology world to never say ‘never’,” said Thurber. “In the foreseeable future, our model is very much focused on the software licensing and working with partners on the hardware development, and then the branding, selling, etc.”

venturebeat.com

KS&R
Data to Knowledge
120 Madison Street, 15th Floor
Syracuse, New York 13202
www.ksrinc.com
(315) 470-1350
1-888-8KSRINC