

Android launches with big goals but the buzz is missing

Richard Waters

Thanks to its new web browser, Chrome, Google's ambition to rival Microsoft as a producer of the software "platforms" on which internet applications run has been very much in the news this week.

However, an earlier and equally prominent attempt to do much the same thing on mobile phones - its Android software - looks set for a bumpy ride when the first handsets hit the market this year.

Failure to win a big following for Android might not hamper Google's broader business goals in the mobile industry, but it suggests that the company's software initiatives - including Chrome are not always guaranteed a big following, according to industry analysts.

Android, announced in November, was billed by Google as a central part of its most important strategic push: the attempt to put its search and other services directly into the hands of millions of mobile users, creating an advertising market that executives say could be worth far more than the one on which the company's fortunes were founded.

As a close partner of Apple, Google has already won a prominent position on the iPhone. Yet Apple's latest object of desire does not represent the technological future that Google had in mind. As a closed system, in which Apple and the mobile carriers have considerable control over the applications that can be used on the handset, the iPhone is based on a different model to the open internet, where Google reigns supreme.

The Android software reflects a different approach. By making the software available free of charge to any handset maker, Google hopes to seed a large number of handsets, all of which will be open to its services.

That very approach explains many of the drawbacks that are likely to turn the "Google phone" into just another mobile handset, rather than a piece of technology capable of making consumers queue outside mobile phone stores overnight, as the iPhone did.

Like Microsoft, whose operating system is widely used in smartphones, Google will have little control over the ultimate consumer experience. Elements of the software interface, such as the web browser, could help to stimulate more mobile internet use, but far more will depend on hardware and service considerations that are controlled by handset makers and carriers.

"I don't think there's a lot of consumer excitement around the platform - ultimately, it's just another operating system," said John Poisson, founder of Tiny Pictures, a company that makes applications for mobile handsets.

While his company plans to make its application available on the Android phone early on, other developers are holding back - suggesting that the Google phone will not enjoy the overwhelming support from developers that has helped to propel the iPhone.

"It's just pragmatic for developers to say, 'Let's wait and see'," said Tom Conrad, chief technology officer of Pandora, a popular music service on the iPhone. "There are already seven mobile operating systems; Android is number eight."

The immaturity of the software, compared with Apple, also makes it less easy for developers to work with Android, he added.

Google's lack of end-to-end control over the consumer experience around Android has served to highlight the most glaring difference with the iPhone. Apple, the most accomplished product development and marketing company in the consumer technology business, keeps close control over every detail of its devices, from writing the software to deciding how products should be presented in its own stores.

The most successful handsets, which also include the BlackBerry and Danger's Sidekick, all follow this more integrated model, said Mr Conrad. By contrast, the first Android devices, expected from T-Mobile next month, will be made by Taiwanese manufacturer HTC, which already produces handsets running other operating systems, including Microsoft's Windows.

"My expectation is very low - it seems to be a halfhearted development effort, and a halfhearted marketing effort," said John Jackson, an analyst at Yankee Group.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, September 6 e 7 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 10.

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