

Google and partners seek a television foothold

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Google and Intel have teamed with Sony to develop a platform called Google TV to bring the Web into the living room through a new generation of televisions and set-top boxes.

The move is an effort by Google and Intel to extend their dominance of computing to an arena where they have little sway, the TV. For Sony, which has struggled to retain a pricing and technological advantage in the competitive TV hardware market, the partnership is an effort to get a leg up on competitors.

The partners envision technology that will make it as easy for TV users to navigate Web applications, like the Twitter social network and the Picasa photo site, as it is to change the channel. Google intends to open the Google TV platform, which is based on its Android operating system for cellphones, to software developers in the hopes of spurring the same creativity that the consumers have seen in phone apps.

The three heavyweights have also tapped Logitech, which specializes in remote controls and computer speakers, for peripheral devices, including a remote with a tiny keyboard, that will work with the systems.

The project, which has been under way for several months, was described by people with knowledge of its work. They requested anonymity because the partners are not allowed to speak publicly at this point and details remain under negotiation.

Spokesmen for Google, Intel and Logitech declined to comment. A Sony spokesman said he was not familiar with the project.

The companies appear to be hiring for Android-related jobs. Intel, for example, has listed jobs for senior application engineers with Android programming experience who can help extend Intel's technology "from PC screen to mobile screen and TV screen." Logitech also has several job listings for Android developers, including a position for an "embedded software engineer" with experience building "audio and video products based on the Android platform."

Google, the leading player in Web search and advertising, has been seeking to extend its influence into new realms, like mobile phones.

Now it has set its sights on the television. "Google wants to be everywhere the Internet is so they can put ads there," said one of the people with knowledge of the project.

Based on Google's Android operating system, the TV technology runs on Intel's Atom chips.

Google has built a prototype set-top box, but the technology may be incorporated directly into TVs or other devices, like Blu-ray players.

The Google TV software will present users with a new interface for TVs that lets them perform Internet functions like search while also pulling down Web programming like YouTube videos or TV shows from Hulu.com. The technology will also allow downloadable Web applications, from games to social networks, to run on the devices.

A person with knowledge of the project said that Google TV would use a version of Google's Chrome Web browser, which currently does not work on Android mobile phones. For Google, the project is a pre-emptive move to get a foothold in the living room as more consumers start exploring ways to bring Web content to their television sets. Google wants to aggressively ensure that its services, in particular its search and advertising systems, play a central role.

Google's efforts to break into television advertising date back three years. Through a program called Google TV Ads, the company sells advertising on a small number of satellite and small cable television systems, as well as some cable networks. But interest in the program has been limited and the amount of revenue that Google has been able to generate from it has been small.

The partners will face a crowded field. In addition to the makers of traditional cable and satellite set-top boxes, Cisco Systems and Motorola, a host of new entrants have entered the game, including Microsoft, Apple, TiVo and start-ups like Roku and Boxee, which already stream video from Netflix, MLB.com and other Web sites directly to television sets.

For Intel, the effort represents a way to get its line of energy-efficient Atom chips, currently found in laptops, into TVs.

The software will be open source at its core, meaning that device and TV makers should have broad access to it.

Sony, however, hopes to gain an edge over competitors by bringing out the first appliances and possibly TVs running the software, possibly under a new brand. The Japanese consumer electronics giant, which owns Sony Pictures, is not expected to put its movie content directly on the devices but will probably have a link to a digital store.

A person with knowledge of the Google TV project said that the set-top box technology was sufficiently advanced that Google had begun testing it with Dish Network, one of Google's longstanding partners in the TV Ads program. A spokeswoman for Dish Network declined to comment. Earlier this month, The Wall Street Journal reported that Google was testing a television programming search service with Dish Network.

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