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BlackBerry launches square phone in push for business users

By Daniel Thomas, Telecoms Correspondent

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BlackBerry is making its latest bid to regain its once trusted place in the pockets of the business user with a square-shaped smartphone designed for reading spreadsheets and documents.

Unveiled on Wednesday at events in Toronto, London and Dubai, the \$599 Passport is the company's first global phone launch since John Chen took over as chief executive in November.

The company hopes to win back its once loyal following among office workers with a 4.5-inch square screen for viewing and creating content, such as emails and business documents. The much-loved tap keyboard is also back, but this time with a second use as a touch pad, while a digital assistant can help organise meetings and manage apps.

The phone met with broadly positive reviews, even if some analysts warned that it could be a niche product within its target market of the "regulated industries" of finance and healthcare, and government.

"Mobile professionals" make up to 30 per cent of the market, according to BlackBerry, but the company's share of the global enterprise sector has already fallen from 10 per cent to under 3 per cent in the past year, according to research group IDC.

Francisco Jeronimo, analyst at IDC, predicted that it could be the start of the BlackBerry turnaround in the enterprise market, although he did not expect the device to grow the group's market share.

Ben Wood, analyst at CCS Insight, said: "This is definitely a Marmite product – based on our experience so far, people either love the design or are a little perplexed by the size and shape.

"The Passport is a device for the 'BlackBerry faithful' and businesses that are still committed to BlackBerry – it's a long overdue update."

Its success will be closely monitored by investors as the Canadian group attempts to claw back sales in a market dominated by [Apple](#) and [Samsung](#).

BlackBerry said that it wanted to “arm mobile professionals with tools that make them more productive”.

Under Mr Chen, BlackBerry has stabilised its once-severe cash burn and set out a clearer strategy to return to growth.

The company wants to return to profitability in the next fiscal year, although analysts still expect its second-quarter results announcement on Friday to show a loss. Investors have responded positively to Mr Chen’s tenure with a 45 per cent rally in BlackBerry’s stock this year. The shares were up 2.9 per cent at \$10.88 by Wednesday lunchtime.



“We were guided by a simple yet challenging idea – to set aside the limitations of traditional design and to instead simply build a device that fundamentally changes the way business professionals get work done on their smartphone,” said Mr Chen.

Mr Chen has made it clear that the device is not aimed at the consumer market where its share has dwindled to a negligible level over the past few years.

Instead, the Passport is designed to work alongside BlackBerry’s secure software and messaging services.

The wide screen of the Passport can display the details of a Microsoft Excel document for an office worker, for example, or an X-ray image for a doctor. Mr Chen told the Financial Times this summer that should the device prove a success then the company already had plans for the Passport 2.

The screen uses hard-wearing “Gorilla Glass” alongside stainless steel for strength, which BlackBerry promises will provide durability.

BlackBerry said that the Passport’s Qwerty keyboard is almost four times more accurate than BlackBerry 10 virtual keyboards – the error rate is claimed to be on average 74 per cent lower.



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