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BlackBerry

BlackBerry looks for reboot with Android-powered Priv



NOVEMBER 6, 2015 by **Daniel Thomas**, Telecoms Correspondent

BlackBerry is betting its future on a novel twist to its much-loved keyboard and the belated use of Google's Android operating system after years relying on its own software.

Priv, the Canadian group's latest [device \(https://www.ft.com/content/f2114534-6388-11e5-a28b-50226830d644\)](https://www.ft.com/content/f2114534-6388-11e5-a28b-50226830d644), will feature a slide-down physical keyboard attached to a high-end Android smartphone, marking the first time that the company has dropped its own operating system.

The phone comes with a number of privacy and security features, including a dashboard showing what apps are using the phone's data and functions.

The company hopes a longer lasting battery and a number of productivity tools will add to its attractions for business users who dislike the touchscreen keyboards on many modern smartphones.

But including a battery that lasts for 23 hours and a pull-down keyboard makes the phone considerably heavier and bigger than some top-end [Android devices \(https://www.ft.com/content/ofdb26e6-5715-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2\)](https://www.ft.com/content/ofdb26e6-5715-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2).

The phone will cost £560, which is less than some premium devices from companies such as Apple and Samsung.

BlackBerry has almost disappeared from the smartphone market, with about 0.3 per cent of global smartphone shipments according to IDC. The group once accounted for as much as a fifth of sales during its 2009 peak.

But even though the company missed the early years of the smartphone revolution, the brand is still regarded fondly by many business users.

The biggest shift for the company as it tries to win more of them back is the adoption of the Android operating system.

Gareth Hurn, director of device portfolio planning at BlackBerry, admitted that using its own operating system exclusively reduced the size of its possible market.

“We don’t want to be disqualified for reasons of ecosystem. We think that the [smartphone] market is quite tired — it’s all a single slab of glass,” he said. “When you move into the ultra competitive Android market it needs to exceed what’s already out there.”

However, analysts questioned whether the Priv would be enough to reverse a long-term drop in handset sales. Many are increasingly sceptical whether the group has a future in the sector after recent launches failed to arrest its near terminal fall in market share.

“This device comes too late to change their fortunes in the handset business,” said Francisco Jeronimo, research director at IDC. “The Priv is not going to do much for BlackBerry. If their sales continue to decline at the current rates, their handset business is definitely over soon.”

Nokia made a similar move shortly before the Finnish handset maker gave up its ambitions in the market altogether to concentrate on network building.

The Finnish handset maker found that its Android-based product was not sufficiently different to draw customers away from the leading franchises of Samsung and Chinese handset makers such as Huawei.

Mr Hurn said that the security functions, alongside other BlackBerry features such as a central communications “hub”, would be enough to stand out in the crowded Android market.



“Smartphone privacy has not been a consumer issue before — it has been more for enterprise — but that’s changed. A smartphone has so much data on a user and the Priv tells them where there is a risk and helps them deal with it,” he said.

But Mr Jeronimo said that rival smartphones using Knox software security from Samsung were half the cost.

Nicholas McQuire, analyst at CCS Insight, said the Priv was likely to be “a make or break product for the hardware arm of BlackBerry’s business and [chief executive] John Chen has made little secret of that”.

Mr McQuire added that even if the Priv failed, BlackBerry would still have a future in software and services focused on enterprise security and privacy.

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