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It's sink or swim as Samsung Wave makes a splash

Asher Moses in Barcelona
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Samsung has stepped up its smartphone war against newer competitors such as Apple by unveiling a completely new mobile phone platform, while Sony Ericsson is betting on Google's Android to pull it into the future.

The companies launched a range of slick new smartphone models on the eve of the world's biggest annual gathering for the mobile phone industry, the Mobile World Congress (MWC) in Barcelona.

With so many different mobile platforms now vying for attention and handsets looking increasingly similar, analysts believe the victor will be the one that woos the most developers and boasts the most apps.

"We are at the most dynamic period for the mobile industry ever," said J.K. Shin, the head of Samsung's mobile business.

Samsung, the No.2 mobile phone vendor behind Nokia, staged an elaborate pre-MWC event to showcase a single phone - the Wave - which it expects to begin selling in Australia by the middle of the year.

The device is the first of several models to be based on Samsung's Bada platform, which it is lining up to compete with Google's Android, Apple's iPhone, Microsoft's Windows Mobile and RIM's BlackBerry platforms, among others.

It will launch with its own app store, promising a range of social networking tools, games, navigation software, e-book readers and other lifestyle apps.

Like Android, Bada is an open platform, but Telsyte analyst Warren Chaisatien believes Samsung will struggle to convince software developers to build their apps for yet another platform.

"There are already too many platforms in my opinion and the market is very fragmented," he said.

"Samsung will have to do a lot of work to get developer support - competing with Apple App store, Google App store, BlackBerry App store, Nokia Ovi store and Microsoft App store."

Gartner analyst Robin Simpson agreed and said Samsung was seeking to reduce its reliance on the embattled Windows Mobile platform, which is expected to get a major refresh this week. Bada also enabled Samsung to gain complete control of its handsets' hardware and software.

"It's Samsung trying to reduce their reliance on Microsoft because Microsoft hasn't done the kind of innovation that's going to bring sales," Simpson said.

Wave uses a new touchscreen technology called Super AMOLED, which Samsung says allows for more vivid colours and a thinner device as touchscreen sensors can be placed directly on to the 3.3-inch display, rather than requiring a separate touch panel.

Sony Ericsson threw its chips in with Android, debuting two devices based on the platform - the Xperia X10 mini and the Xperia X10 mini pro. Both include a 2.6-inch touchscreen, version 1.6 of Android (with access to apps on the Android Market) and a 5-megapixel camera, but the "pro" model adds a slide-out QWERTY keyboard.

The company also unveiled its super-thin Vivaz Pro, which also has a QWERTY keyboard and touch screen (3.2-inch) but, unlike most phones, is also capable of shooting high-definition 720p video and includes an 8-megapixel camera.

Both the Sony Ericsson and Samsung devices are fully integrated with social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, so users can see texts, tweets, wall posts and call history for each contact through a single interface.

Samsung's Wave can pull a user's MySpace, Facebook, Yahoo, Hotmail and SMS/MMS messages into a single inbox, while the calendar app on the phone incorporates appointments from the user's Google, Yahoo and Facebook calendars.

And unlike the iPhone, Wave supports Adobe Flash, opening the handset up to run advanced browser-based apps.

Asher Moses travelled to Barcelona as a guest of Samsung.

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