

BlackBerry Focuses on Cool Factor as It Returns to Orlando for Annual Event

David Friend, The Canadian Press

ORLANDO, Fla. - BlackBerry will pull out all the stops this week as the company welcomes thousands of industry players for BlackBerry Live, its annual three-day conference which promises to offer some perspective into its future.

Chief executive Thorsten Heins will take the stage on Tuesday and is expected to deliver a keynote speech that could reveal a lower-priced version of its latest phone and some clues about whether the company plans to abandon tablet technology forever.

BlackBerry Live is both an information session and a hype machine for the company, which has several giant parties planned for its supporters who fly in from around the world and to attend the event.

The conference takes place at the Marriott World Center, a sprawling complex that acts as a mothership for all of the related events that surround it that range from workshops to live concerts.

On Sunday, the preparations were underway for the massive event as staff scurried around, or in some cases scooted through the halls on Segways, putting up signs and other displays.

Tour buses with the BlackBerry logo warmed up their engines and drove practice runs around the various hotels and resorts where conference attendees will stay.

The meticulous plans have been in the works for months.

When BlackBerry held the conference last year, the company was in dire straits. Questions swirled about its future and whether it would sell its operations to a competitor. Heins tried to refocus the attention by unveiling new features of the then in-development BlackBerry 10 operating system, though the crowd wasn't shown what the new phones would look like.

Since then, the company has aggressively tried to regain its status as a leading smartphone maker with the launch of BlackBerry 10 and two new smartphones.

This year, BlackBerry will use the event to champion its image as a major smartphone player, though sales numbers for its latest devices in the United States

won't be revealed until the company reports its financial results in June.

One lingering question will be whether another BlackBerry PlayBook will see the light of day, since Heins has been cryptic about the company's strategy in the portable computer market.

Last month, he told The Canadian Press that the company is "thinking about" another tablet "in the context of BlackBerry 10." In later interviews, he predicted tablets will be a dying technology in five years, replaced by other mobile computing devices.

It's widely expected that Heins hopes to turn BlackBerry smartphones into portable computers that work in conjunction with other devices — think bringing your smartphone into work and it linking with your monitor through Bluetooth technology.

While it's unlikely he will unveil a new product at the conference that maps out how those ideas will be linked, he boasted in January that he had returned his laptop to BlackBerry's IT department as he had adopted the new version of the smartphone as his personal computer.

BlackBerry Live doubles as both a way to inform telecom executives and developers about the company's future as well as a way to impress them with flashy parties and famous people.

This year, Alicia Keys is scheduled to be part of an hour-long discussion about women in the technology industry before she appears at a private concert Tuesday at Universal Studios.

Other artists scheduled to appear include Miguel, the Alabama Shakes and DJ Cedric Gervais who generated headlines last year when Madonna mentioned his song "Molly" and wound up in a social media spat with Canadian DJ Deadmau5. The concert will be streamed live on the company's website.

BlackBerry hired Keys as global creative director in January, but the pop singer has played a relatively minor public role as the face of BlackBerry.

During her concerts she uses the BlackBerry as a prop for one of her songs and uploads live performance videos from the phone. She also occasionally posts updates on social media that plug the new smartphones, though her face isn't part of the company's advertising campaign.

BlackBerry has insisted that Keys is playing an active role in the company's new

devices, and has made several presentations to executives over the past few months.

In April, Keys visited the company's headquarters in Waterloo, Ont. to discuss her future role at the company, which has been written off by some in the industry as little more than a glorified spokeswoman.

"That's exactly what she is. Let's not kid ourselves," said Mark Tauschek, senior research analyst at InfoTech Research Group.

"(It's not) like she's actually going to have input into industrial design and functionality. At the end of the day, she's not qualified to do that, and second of all she probably doesn't have the inclination to do that."

As far as representing the BlackBerry, Keys has delivered mixed results at best. She grabbed the most headlines earlier this year when it appeared that she tweeted from an iPhone just days after announcing her partnership with BlackBerry.

She later said the post wasn't hers, but that her Twitter account had been "hacked."

What Keys brings to BlackBerry is a celebrity name that is respected across several demographics, but like many spokespeople — previous BlackBerry representatives like Will.I.Am and U2 included — it's difficult to quantify how they influence the brand.

"We don't have any previous examples as to where this has helped much," said Troy Crandall, MacDougall, MacDougall & MacTier

"So I guess analysts, like anyone, go on past history or other company's histories and how well this really helped anyone."

For Keys, BlackBerry Live may prove to be the greatest opportunity to prove to skeptics that she's more than just a famous face.

On Wednesday, BlackBerry will focus several events on the future outside North America. The company is a dominant player in countries like Nigeria, the Philippines and Indonesia.

Source URL (retrieved on 06/12/2013 - 4:35am):

<http://www.wirelessweek.com/news/2013/05/blackberry-focuses-cool-factor-it-returns-orlando-annual-event>