

Build-your-own Google handset reconstructs smartphone

AFP, Barcelona

With a smartphone that slots together piece by piece like Lego, US Internet giant Google is trying to reinvent the mobile as most phone makers are honing sleeker handsets.

The company aims to challenge its rival Apple's thin iPhones with the Google Ara project, giving smartphone aficionados the option to build their phone themselves.

Analysts say tech boffins will love it but remain cautious about how popular it may be compared to polished conventional smartphones that sit snugly in the palm.

Google says the Ara phone is part of its bid to widen Internet access to users in developing countries and could create a new industry for assembly-ready handset parts.

Google's associate, US firm Yeze, presented a prototype of the build-your-own device this week at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, the world's biggest wireless telecom trade fair.

The phone consists of a base structure on which various square, magnetic modular parts can be attached: screen, battery, camera, speakers and more. Google plans to release it in three sizes.

Ara would allow users to replace individual components rather than throwing the whole thing away and buying a new handset. It says the base unit will last at least five or six years.



Google's Senior Vice President Sundar Pichai gives a keynote address during the opening day of the 2015 Mobile World Congress in Barcelona on Monday.

"That is good for the environment," said Annette Zimmermann, a telecom specialist at German consultancy Gartner.

Ara "could reshape the mobile landscape," said Paul Eremenko, director of the Ara Project, in a presentation to experts in January.

He said it aimed to gain six billion potential clients -- the current billion people who currently use smartphones "and five

billion future users", most of them in emerging markets.

Google says a mid-range Ara phone could cost between \$50 and \$100 to produce, but has not given details of the likely sales price, leaving questions marks over how sustainable such a product would be.

"Google is not looking to make money directly with Ara," said Jerome Colin, a telecom

expert at French consultancy group Roland Berger.

"It is basically looking to spread smartphones in countries with low purchasing power, and to unify the telecom world around its Android system."

Tech fans and bloggers queued up to see the prototype presented in Barcelona, but analysts were sceptical. "The trend in mobile phones is to have small, thin, really

integrated products. If you make a product modular it immediately means that you're going to have to make compromises on that," said Ben Wood, head researcher at consultancy CCS Insight.

"The other question mark I have is: beyond geeks, who really knows" about components? he added.

"If I said to you, which processor do you want in your smartphone, I think you could stop people in the street and they'd just look at you like you'd landed from Mars."

Eremenko acknowledged that consumers risked being overwhelmed by too many technical options when it comes to choosing components.

"We need to resolve the paradox of choice," he said in January.

Google plans a test launch of the device in Puerto Rico by the end of this year.

"We will have to see if the public takes to it," said Zimmerman.

Google dominates the world of Internet searches and its Android operating system can be used on 80 percent of the world's smartphones. It also holds a large market share in wireless tablet devices.

Its senior vice-president Sundar Pichai said in Barcelona on Monday that it was in talks with telecom companies about possibly using their networks to operate its own mobile phone services in the United States.

Brac Bank gets new head of communications

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Zara Jabeen Mahbub has taken over the charge of the head of communications and service quality at Brac Bank, effective from February 15.

Prior to the promotion, she was the head of customer experience and call centre under retail banking division of the bank, the bank said in a statement yesterday.

Zara Jabeen has previously served the bank as head of service quality, premium banking and retail marketing, according to the statement.

Now as a member of the bank's executive (management) committee, she is responsible for issues related to external affairs, marketing, corporate social responsibility and service quality. She joined Brac Bank in March 2009 and has 19 years of multifaceted work experience in various industries in Bangladesh and the US.

She obtained her BBA from North South University in Dhaka and completed her MBA from the University of California Berkeley's Haas School of Business with focus on strategic marketing and non-profits.



Natural disasters to threaten Bangladesh manufacturing

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With 66 percent of the world's population expected to live in cities by 2050, the resilience of urban areas to more frequent extreme weather events driven by climate change will determine the level of disruption to global trade.

With foreign investment continuing to flow into countries highly exposed to natural hazards, those which are unable to demonstrate robust resilience may lose an element of their competitiveness, Hewston said.

"Company decision-making over sourcing locations or market entry is increasingly influenced by issues such as strength of infrastructure and institutional robustness."

Dhaka was named as the most vulnerable city in the world in the 2013 edition of the ranking.



Nazia Andaleeb Preema, adviser to Bangladesh Brand Forum, speaks at a press conference to announce RFL Inspiring Women Award, an event to honour leading women professionals that will held on March 8, at Radisson hotel in the capital recently. Shariful Islam, founder of Bangladesh Brand Forum, was also present.

Brand Forum to honour inspiring women professionals

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Bangladesh Brand Forum will award inspiring professional women in various fields to empower and equip local women to reach leadership positions.

The event, styled RFL Inspiring Women Award, will be held on March 8 at Radisson Blu hotel in the capital, Nazia Andaleeb Preema, adviser to Brand Forum, said in a statement yesterday.

About 500 guests from local and multinational corporate sector, development agencies, government bodies and dignitaries from foreign embassies

will be in attendance.

Professional women will be awarded to make them prominent as inspirational role models, as a part of second phase of 'Inspiring Women in Leadership', based on the findings of the Women Leadership Summit's first phase, Preema said.

RFL is the title partner of the event, along with a2i and FICCI providing event support management. The Daily Star is the strategic partner, while Webable is the social media partner, and Maverick Studios is working as the event's digital partner.

Project launched to provide financial services to 4.52 lakh rural people

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A project was launched yesterday to provide financial services and technical training to 4.52 lakh women and men in rural areas across the country to increase food security.

State Minister for Finance and Planning MA Mannan inaugurated the project titled "Promoting agricultural commercialisation and enterprises (PACE)" at a workshop in the capital with PKSF Chairman Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad in the chair.

Supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation will implement the project, IFAD said in a statement yesterday.

The total cost of the PACE project is \$92.9 million. IFAD will provide \$40 mil-

lion as loan while PKSF and its partner organisations will contribute \$22.45 million and \$30.04 million respectively. In addition, the Republic of Korea will provide \$0.36 million as grant.

The government and IFAD signed a loan agreement in this effect on December 11 last year.

The project is designed to improve profitable business opportunities for micro-entrepreneurs and create employment for poor people in rural areas, according to the statement.

"It will also develop an internet-based platform to help entrepreneurs in marketing their products."

Senior Secretary of the Economic Relations Division Mohammad Mejbahuddin and IFAD Country Programme Officer Nicolas Syed, among others, attended the workshop.

IMF offers recipe to fuel economic growth

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Kamal said the government would utilise unused public land in the country's northern parts for attracting investment.

The government also plans to take an initiative for capital dredging for all rivers to raise their banks such that economic zones can be set up alongside them, said the minister.

Focusing on the IMF's emphasis on meeting the infrastructure deficit, Kamal said the four-lane Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Mymensingh highways would be completed this year.

He said the work of the construction of Padma bridge and the setting up of power plants in Rampal, Payra and Matarbari are progressing fast. The completion of the deep-sea ports would boost GDP growth.

The planning minister presented to the IMF mission the main aspects of the forthcoming seventh five-year plan, which aims to create 1.32 crore new jobs between 2016 and 2020.

The IMF team wanted to know whether the prevailing political situation, which has dealt serious blows to the economy, would have any adverse impact on GDP growth.

In response, Kamal said he has already got the GDP growth achieved in the last six months. He, however, declined to disclose the figure to the IMF team.

He said the growth in the first eight months of the fiscal year was higher compared to the same period a year ago.

Google, Apple may disrupt car industry: Fiat

BBC NEWS

The traditional motor industry would be foolish to ignore moves by Google and Apple into car technology, said Fiat-Chrysler boss Sergio Marchionne.

The chief executive of one of the world's biggest carmakers said the two US companies were "incredibly serious" about their automotive ambitions.

He said their move into driverless technology and electric vehicles could be "disruptive" for manufacturers.

Marchionne commented on the tech giants' plans at the Geneva Motor Show.

He said it is always a good thing when someone new wants to shake up the industry, "but when you're the guy whose life is being disrupted, it's not necessarily a good feeling," he added.

Apple has several hundred people working on a car project, called Titan. The company's vast resources made it a potential tough competitor, although Marchionne said he'd like to talk Apple about working on potential projects.

However, he said that neither Google nor Apple should "underestimate carmakers' ability to respond and adapt" to new competitive challenges.

Among Fiat-Chrysler's brands are Ferrari, Alfa Romeo and Maserati, and Marchionne says these companies are key to driving future profits.



Jamaludin Ibrahim, president of Axiata Berhad, receives GSMA Chairman's Award for 2015 from Jon Fredrik Baksaas, GSMA chairman, at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona recently.

Bangladesh becoming a top spot for Muslim travellers

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"Travel continues to be a core passion for consumers and we are confident the index will prove to be a trusted resource for this important, fast-growing traveller segment," said Matthew Driver, president for Southeast Asia of MasterCard.

Not surprisingly, Saudi Arabia saw the highest number of Muslim arrivals in 2014 of 10.2 million, followed by Turkey at 8.1 million.

The overall average score for 40 destinations currently stands at 56, while the overall average index score for the complete 100 destinations is at 43.8.

From a regional perspective, Asia Pacific destinations lead with an average score of 54.

The study also said the Muslim population is growing rapidly and is expected to become 26.5 percent of the world's population by 2030.

The majority of the Muslim population comes from some of the fastest growing economies such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey and the Gulf countries.

Muslims are now becoming an important consumer market for the entire world. They will become an increasingly important segment for businesses across all sectors.

The top 100 destinations ranked in the report are taken from 110 studied, including 29 OIC destinations and 81 non-OIC destinations. These 100 destinations represent more than 95 percent of Muslim visitor arrivals in 2014.

Go for technology-neutral spectrum auction

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All in all, Grameenphone, with its 51.5-million customer base, is an extremely important part for Telenor Group.

As a result, the group is planning new types of services for the Bangladesh market such as banking, health and education.

The company is currently discussing with the government to introduce educational services, so that one can get access to schools, professors and universities from his/her mobile phone.

"We also think it will be a big opportunity if we can provide the farmers across Asia with information about crop prices, harvesting information and so on."

Brekke also touched upon Telenor's current strategy, which is "internet for all". "Everyone talks about internet but very few talk

about internet for all and what we mean by all is literally everyone. That's the strategy in Bangladesh and also in other Asian markets."

Around 15 percent of Telenor's customers in Asia are using internet and at the end of 2017 the group wants to see the number to rise to 80 percent.

So, out of 51.5 million customers of Grameenphone today, the company would like 40 million of them to be using internet on a daily basis by the end of 2017, he said.

"To do that, we need to roll out data network strategy and we are discussing with the government of Bangladesh to give us 4G network in the country," he said, adding that the operator also needs to raise awareness about internet.

About mobile financial services, he said they would like to have

most of their customers have banking relations, transactional services, bill payments, lending and saving from their mobile phones.

Asked if they would be competing with financial institutions, he said: "We are not competitors of the banks. I'm not going to go after the banks' customers. We will only deal with those who do not have banks accounts -- we will not deal with existing banking customers."

Ideally, he said, they will look for having own banking licences, an exercise that is allowed in Bangladesh's three neighbouring countries -- India, Pakistan and Myanmar.

"If that's not possible, we will provide the service by tying up with banks," he said, adding that they will continue discussions with the central bank to get their own bank-

ing licence.

Grameenphone also wants to bring all its customers under insurance coverage -- health, death, accidental and hospital insurance packages.

"We have signed two partnerships -- one with a global company and another with a local insurance one. If one customer gives a certain amount of money, he or she will be given the insurance facility."

Asked if the ongoing political crisis in Bangladesh has had any impact on Grameenphone's revenues, he replied in the affirmative. "But it's not too significant."

"We are long-term investors and we are looking at the fundamentals of your country such as young people and the low mobile penetration. The most important thing for us is the regulatory environment."