

Apple set to expand Siri, taking different route from Amazon's Alexa

REUTERS

Apple Inc is expected to announce plans next week to make its Siri voice assistant work with a larger variety of apps, as the technology company looks to counter the runaway success of Amazon.com Inc's competing Alexa service.

But the Cupertino, California company is likely to stick to its tested method of focusing on a small amount of features and trying to perfect them, rather than casting as wide a net as possible, according to engineers and artificial intelligence industry insiders.

Currently, Apple's Siri works with only six types of app: ride-hailing and sharing; messaging and calling; photo search; payments; fitness; and auto infotainment systems. At the company's annual developer conference next week, it is expected to add to those categories.

Some industry-watchers have also predicted Apple will announce hardware similar to Amazon's Echo device for the home, which has been a hot-seller recently. Apple declined comment.

But even if Siri doubles its areas

of expertise, it will be a far cry from the 12,000 or so tasks that Amazon.com's Alexa can handle.

The difference illustrates a strategic divide between the two tech rivals. Apple is betting that customers will not use voice commands without an experience similar to speaking with a human, and so it is limiting what Siri can do in order to make sure it works well.

Amazon puts no such restrictions on Alexa, wagering that the voice assistant with the most "skills," its term for apps on its Echo assistant devices, will gain a loyal following, even if it sometimes makes mistakes and takes more effort to use.

The clash of approaches is coming to a head as virtual assistants that respond to voice commands become a priority for the leading tech companies, which want to find new ways of engaging customers and make more money from shopping and online services.

Now, an iPhone user can say, "Hey Siri, I'd like a ride to the airport" or "Hey Siri, order me a car," and Siri will open the Uber or Lyft ride service app and start booking a trip.

Apart from some basic home and music functions, Alexa needs more specific directions, using a limited set of commands such as "ask" or "tell." For example, "Alexa, ask Uber for a ride," will start the process of summoning a car, but "Alexa, order me an Uber" will not, because Alexa does not make the connection that it should open the Uber "skill."

After some setup, Alexa can order a pizza from Domino's, while Siri cannot get a pie because food delivery is not - so far - one of the categories of apps that Apple has opened up to Siri.

"In typical Apple fashion, they've allowed for only a few use cases, but they do them very well," said Charles Jolley, chief executive of Ozlo, maker of an intelligent assistant app. Apple spokeswoman Trudy Muller said the company does not comment on its plans for developers.

Amazon said in a statement: "Our goal is to make speaking with Alexa as natural and easy as possible, so we're looking at ways to improve this over time."

Apple's narrower focus could become a problem, said Matt McIlwain, a venture capitalist with

Seattle-based Madrona Venture Group. The potential of Apple's original iPhone did not come to light until thousands of developers started building apps. McIlwain said he expects Apple to add new categories at its Worldwide Developers Conference next week, but not nearly enough to match Alexa's number of skills.

"To attract developers in the modern world, you need a platform," McIlwain said. "If Apple does not launch a 'skills store,' that would be a mistake."

Neither Siri nor Alexa has a clear path to making money. Siri works as an additional tool for controlling traditional apps, and Apple pays money to owners of those apps. Alexa's skills are free, and developers are not paid.

At the moment, because of their limits, voice apps are "a side dish, not the entree," according to Oren Etzioni, CEO of the Allen Institute for Artificial Intelligence. Amazon was wise to not commit to an economic model at such an early state, Etzioni said. "Once a successful economic model for developers emerges, people are going to gravitate to it."



EDOTCO BANGLADESH

Rahul Chaudhary, country managing director of edotco Bangladesh; Shahjahan Mahmood, chairman of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, and Shyam Sunder Sikder, posts and telecom secretary, attend the launch of a corporate social responsibility initiative of edotco Bangladesh, at a programme in Narsingdi yesterday. Edotco will supply free water and electricity to the rural communities in Bangladesh.

Canada exports to US hit record high

AFP, Ottawa

Canada's trade deficit narrowed in April to Can\$370 million (US\$274 million), as exports to the United States hit a record high, the government statistical agency announced Friday.

The results were worse than the Can\$30 million deficit forecast by economists, following a Can\$936 million deficit in March (revised from the Can\$135 million deficit first reported).

Canada exported a record Can\$36.1 billion worth of goods to its neighbor, the United States in April -- mostly cars, natural

gas and softwood lumber. Imports from the US were up too, to Can\$31.1 billion, widening Canada's trade surplus with the United States to Can\$5 billion.

Total exports rose 1.8 percent to Can\$47.7 billion, led by higher exports of cars and light trucks, while higher prices pushed up imports 0.6 percent to Can\$48.1 billion.

Exports of natural gas led an increase in energy exports, attributed to higher prices.

There were also higher exports of coal to the Netherlands. Statistics Canada noted that coal exports have been strong in recent months as Australia's coal industry recovers from Cyclone Debbie.

Remove excise duty on bank deposits: FBCCI

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Moreover, the garment makers have already spent more than \$1 billion for remediation and retrofitting of their factory units to enhance workplace safety as per the recommendation of the Accord and Alliance, he added.

The excessive bank borrowing by the government might hinder the normal flow of money to productive sectors, the country's apex trade body said.

Muhith proposed borrowing Tk 28,203 crore from commercial banks to plug in the budget deficit.

The FBCCI also requested the government to reconsider the uniform 15 percent VAT rate as many small enterprises will be affected by it. Meeting the ambitious revenue target set for the upcoming fiscal year would be difficult for the government due to the declining trend in two important sources -- remittance and export earnings.

Moreover, agricultural crops were badly damaged in some districts due to flash floods, Mohiuddin said. He also suggested the government cut the corporate tax for companies and withdraw it entirely for e-commerce businesses.



FBCCI

Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, speaks at a press conference on the upcoming budget for 2017-18, at the office of the apex trade body in Dhaka yesterday.

Air India privatisation very difficult without debt write-off: India's economic adviser

REUTERS

Privatising state-owned airline Air India will be "very difficult" unless the government writes off at least part of its debts, a senior government economic adviser said on Friday after a top policy panel recommended selling off the carrier.

Loss-making Air India, bailed out in 2012 with \$5.8 billion of federal funding, has troubled the government since a botched merger between two state carriers in 2007 and the rise of private airlines slashed its market share.

Niti Aayog, the government's top policy

think-tank headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, recently submitted a report recommending a stake sale in the airline, a move Finance Minister Arun Jaitley welcomed.

Arvind Panagariya, deputy head of the think-tank, said the government needed to decide whether it would write off all or part of Air India's 520 billion rupees (\$8 billion) in debts.

"Selling it with the current existing debt is going to be very, very difficult even if the sale is open to both domestic and foreign buyers. So, something will need to be done on the debt issue," he told reporters in New Delhi.

Duty hike to raise illegal import of handsets

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The hike in the tax rate may not result in additional government revenue as more and more handsets will be smuggled into the country, according to the association.

"The new tax will also pose a challenge for customers as they will have to pay 11 percent more for buying new handsets," said Rezwanaul Hoque, general secretary of the association.

The association, however, welcomed the tax cut on imports of raw materials and assembling equipment of mobile phones.

"We will be able to produce and assemble at least 90 percent handsets if the government gives us three years' time," said Mahubul.

The leaders of the association also sought a clear policy on establishment of new assembling plants for mobile phones.

"Some global investors have already showed interests to set up such plants in Bangladesh. However, more clarity on policy and process is needed," said Raquibul Kabir, vice-president of the BMPIA.

In India it took three years to establish an assembling plant, and now the country is meeting 70 percent of its demand by assembling handsets locally, said the association. BMPIA Vice President Aminur Rashid, Joint Secretary Mohammed Mesbah Uddin and Treasurer ATM Mahubul Alam also spoke.

Used cars to be dearer

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In the first nine months of the fiscal year, 11,510 cars were imported and nearly Tk 1,600 crore collected as taxes.

The prices of popular models of Toyota - Allion, Fielder, Axio, Premio - will go up by Tk 50,000 to Tk 1 lakh, said Arif Khan Bipu, partner of Trade Stone, an importer and seller of reconditioned cars.

"Car sales will be badly affected because of this," said Abdul Mannan Chowdhury Khosru, a former president of BARVIDA.

In a parallel move, the government has cut the supplementary duty on fuel-efficient and environment-friendly hybrid cars following demands from importers and sellers. Buyers have to pay 35-40 percent more to purchase a hybrid car than a reconditioned one. So with the latest

move, the prices of hybrid cars are expected to come down substantially.

For hybrid cars with engine capacity of up to 1,600cc, the SD has been lessened to 25 percent from existing 30 percent.

The SD has been set at 45 percent for hybrid cars with capacity of 1,601cc to 2,000cc, down from 60 percent at present.

For 2,001cc to 3,000cc hybrid cars, the SD has been brought down to 60 percent from 150 percent. SD of 100 percent has been imposed on 3,001cc to 4,000cc hybrid cars.

The government should have taken this tax measure long before to encourage the use of environment-friendly cars, said Khosru, also the owner of Nippon Motors, an importer and seller.

"Now we can import reconditioned hybrid cars," he added.

Big US companies stay on White House panel despite climate jolt

REUTERS, Washington

Several major US companies, including Wal-Mart Stores Inc, JP Morgan Chase & Co and IBM Corp, on Friday said their CEOs will remain in an influential presidential advisory group despite objecting to President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accord.

Citing the need to stay engaged with the administration, business leaders said they would remain in their advisory roles to continue working to influence White House policies.

Trump, a Republican, on Thursday said he would pull the United States from the landmark 2015 global agreement to fight climate change, drawing anger and condemnation from world leaders and heads of industry.

Tesla Inc Chief Executive Officer Elon Musk and Walt Disney Co CEO Robert Iger reacted by leaving White House advisory councils after Trump's move.

"Climate change is real. Leaving Paris is not good for America or the world," Musk said in a Twitter post on Thursday. He was a member of the business advisory group, known as the President's Strategic and Policy Forum. He also belonged to Trump's manufacturing jobs council.

Asked about CEOs' criticism of the US withdrawal, White House spokesman Sean Spicer on Friday said some companies that expressed support for remaining in the agreement raised concerns about the emissions reduction targets.

Spicer, speaking to reporters at a daily news conference, added he does not know if Trump will replace Musk and Iger on the business council.

A spokesman for Wal-Mart Stores Inc, the largest US retailer, said on Friday that Chief Executive Doug McMillon will remain on the business council.

McMillon said in a Facebook post late on Thursday he was "disappointed in today's news about the Paris Agreement. We think it's important for countries to work together to

reduce greenhouse gas emissions."

IBM CEO Ginni Rometty will remain on the council, the company said on Friday as it reaffirmed its support for the Paris accord.

"IBM believes we can make a constructive contribution by having a direct dialogue with the administration -- as we do with governments around the world," a company spokeswoman said.

Cleveland Clinic Chief Executive Toby Cosgrove will also remain on the council, a spokeswoman said.

Another prominent chief executive, Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan Chase & Co, criticized Trump's

accord to move forward with the US at the table."

Other chief executives also issued statements criticizing the decision to withdraw from the accord, including the heads of Facebook Inc, Alphabet Inc and Goldman Sachs.

General Electric Co CEO Jeff Immelt, who is on Trump's manufacturing council, said on Thursday he was disappointed in the decision and added: "Industry must now lead and not depend on government."

Immelt will remain on the council, a company spokeswoman said on Friday.

AFL-CIO President Richard

concerns about potential economic fallout from the climate deal withdrawal, such as the potential of other countries slapping tariffs on American manufacturers.

In an interview on CNBC on Friday, Cohn said the move was part of the administration's efforts to boost U.S. economic growth and help companies by increasing demand for US goods, along with other efforts targeting regulations, taxes and infrastructure.

"If we can grow our economy, we're going to consume more and more products," he said. "We're going to need more manufacturing in the United States just to deal with domestic consumption."

The issue could resurface later this month when, according to an administration spokesman, the White House plans to hold a June 19 meeting with technology leaders.

Kellyanne Conway, a White House senior adviser, said on Fox News the deal would have "a statistically insignificant impact on the environment."

"If you really cared about that piece, and you're one of these CEOs crowing today, then you would say 'let's get a better deal,'" she said in the interview on Friday, adding that Trump had said he was open to future negotiations.

Trump created the business advisory group in December before taking office to assist him in making policy decisions. The council is led by Stephen Schwarzman, chief executive of Blackstone Group LP.

Blackrock Inc Chief Executive Larry Fink said on Thursday he would continue to serve on Trump's business forum, despite reservations about the White House climate decision because he believes he can add to policy discussions and be a voice for investors.

General Motors Co said Chief Executive Officer Mary Barra also would remain on the presidential advisory panel, while it remained unclear whether Ford Motor Co's new chief executive, James Hackett, would join the group.



AFP

US President Donald Trump signs bills in the White House.

decision. The company acknowledged Friday that he would not step down from Trump's business group.

"I absolutely disagree with the administration on this issue, but we have a responsibility to engage our elected officials to work constructively and advocate for policies that improve people's lives and protect our environment," Dimon said in a statement.

PepsiCo Inc Chief Executive Indra Nooyi is expected to remain on the council. The company said in a statement on Friday that while it is "disappointed with the announcement, we hope there is a way for the

Trumka, who is also on Trump's manufacturing council, called the withdrawal "a failure of American leadership."

A union spokesman said on Friday that Trumka intends to remain on the council to serve "as a voice for working people." Boeing Co Chief Executive Dennis Muilenburg also will remain on the manufacturing council, the company said.

Trump administration officials pushed back against company criticisms in television interviews on Friday. National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn dismissed