

BlackBerry Hasn't Ruled Out A New PlayBook Tablet

David Friend, The Canadian Press

TORONTO - BlackBerry chief executive Thorsten Heins hasn't ruled out taking another swing at the tablet industry, after earlier versions of its PlayBook failed to catch on with consumers.

"We're thinking about it," the head of the smartphone maker said in a recent interview with The Canadian Press.

"But we're thinking about it also in the context of BlackBerry 10."

The BlackBerry 10 operating system is the latest system software from the company and the foundation of its new smartphone models.

An April Fools' Day joke Monday sparked conversation about the potential for another BlackBerry PlayBook tablet to arrive this year. Images purported to be a "road map" for the new tablet were posted on Twitter before the anonymous user revealed it was a hoax.

"Was trying to stir up discussion and excitement for the future!" the poster tweeted later in the day, with apologies.

But Heins said developers at the company are considering how to make another tablet that would integrate with "other screen environments."

"That's how we're thinking about it that right now," he said last week.

The original PlayBook was intended to pair with existing BlackBerry smartphones to make a seamless multi-screen environment that allowed users to access their BlackBerry email through the tablet. When the PlayBook hit stores, some of the technology wasn't in place to link the two devices, though software updates have since resolved those problems.

The coupling of bad reviews and the popularity of Apple's iPad sealed the fate of the PlayBook launch. BlackBerry, then known as Research In Motion, took a US\$485-million writedown in late 2011 to recognize the deep discounts it took to sell the tablet to consumers.

The existing PlayBook devices have the ability to operate on the company's BlackBerry 10 operating system, but a software update has not yet been released. A spokeswoman for BlackBerry said the update will be available by the end of the year.

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Heins said there are numerous factors to consider when weighing whether it's worthwhile to release another tablet.

"The hardware alone is very difficult these days to make money with," he said, acknowledging that few competitors have made it a profitable venture.

"The question is, what are you putting around the tablet as a service or an experienced value proposition that allows you to make money with it, other than just put the pure hardware out there."

The PlayBook was also criticized for a scarcity of apps compared with both BlackBerry's smartphones and competitors like Apple. The company tried to quell those concerns by launching an international roadshow last summer to motivate developers and meet with major companies to open up new discussions.

Heins said the company continues to talk with developers about bringing their apps to the new BlackBerry, which includes the BlackBerry Z10 touchscreen phone and the BlackBerry Q10 keypad version due later this month.

Some of the most popular apps are still missing from BlackBerrys, including Netflix and Instagram, though others like chat program Whatsapp recently launched on the device.

"It is something that you need to constantly work on," he said, noting that developers want to be assured that investing in another platform will be a smart business decision before they take the plunge.

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