Google Drive Joins the Battle of the Cloud

Google Drive is finally in gear.

The oft-rumored and delayed data-storage service made its debut today, joining a growing list of high-tech players serving consumers and small businesses.

Drive lets people store photos, documents and videos on Google's servers so that they are accessible from any Web-connected device and easily shared with others. If you wanted to e-mail a video shot from a smartphone, for instance, you could upload it to the Web through a Drive mobile app and e-mail a link to the video rather than sending a bulky file.

"Drive is at the heart of what cloud computing is," says Sundar Pichai, senior vice president of Chrome and apps. "It was created to be the center of the Google application experience." (Google Docs is integrated into Drive, he says.)

Google's long-awaited entry is sure to raise questions about the immediate future of Dropbox, its startup rival in the space. Google intends to drop the digital hammer on Dropbox with cut-rate pricing, too. While Dropbox charges $10 a month for 50 GB, Google intends to sell a whopping 100 GB for $4.99 a month.

Drive is also offering consumers 5 GB of free storage — more than twice the 2 GB of free storage offered by Dropbox. Google's service is available for Macintosh, Windows and Android devices. An iOS version is weeks away.

Dropbox's file-synchronization system has gained the attention of consumers for its elegance and simplicity — and of suitors, such as Apple and Google, both of whom were spurned by Dropbox.

Dropbox's promise as an IPO candidate has made Dropbox the target of Google,

whose tactic at this point is, if you can't buy 'em, beat 'em.

Dropbox, which says it "does one thing and … better than anyone else," on Monday introduced a new feature that lets users share files through a link.

"This puts Google directly in the game for personal cloud services," says Gartner analyst Michael Gartenberg, who was briefed on Drive. "It's likely to appeal to consumers, especially those who are already engaged in Google services as well as business users who can leverage the integration into Google docs."

More important, Google's foray into the consumer cloud market officially makes it a free-for-all, with nearly every major tech player — Google, Microsoft, Apple and Amazon.com — making a play.

"What took (Google) so long?" says Alastair Mitchell, CEO of Huddle, which recently launched the first enterprise-ready file-synchronization platform, Huddle Sync, for the enterprise market. "We first heard about this four years ago. Sure, Google goes after Dropbox, but it must compete with Apple, Microsoft and — in some cases — Box."

Drive's journey was circuitous, Pichai says, because Google wanted it to work seamlessly and securely with Google- and third-party apps, as well as across multiple languages and devices.

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