RIM’s Secret Weapon for Reviving BlackBerry: HTML5

BlackBerry-app-world-600BlackBerry World, Research In Motion‘s once-a-year event to evangelize its brand, kicks off today in Orlando, Fla. Most of the attention will focus on the coming BlackBerry 10 software, the backbone of RIM’s coming suite of smartphones. RIM’s future depends greatly on BB10, but there’s another software factor that’s playing a large and growing role in the company’s strategy to recover: HTML5.

One of the many problems that RIM is facing is that its current phones are a dying platform. The current software, BlackBerry 7, is the last major release of the operating system before the company transitions to BB10 (which is fundamentally different) this fall. The BlackBerry PlayBook tablet runs a version of the same software that BB10 is based on, but it’s not quite the same.

In short, RIM’s pinned its hopes on software that no one outside of the company has seen or used, although that’s expected to change this week. With so much uncertainty in RIM’s software picture, you’d expect that BlackBerry developers would be heading for the exits, or at least switching to “wait and see” mode for most of 2012.

But that’s not the case. RIM vice president of developer relations Alec Saunders revealed in a recent blog post that app development is going like gangbusters on BlackBerry, with a 21% increase in smartphone apps and an enormous 240% jump in PlayBook apps submitted (though those weren’t necessarily all approved).

The number of apps in BlackBerry App World is now 70,000, and although that’s small potatoes when stacked against the mobile titans of iOS and Android, it’s still probably a lot more than you thought. Saunders says the beginning of 2012 was the “single best quarter” for developer growth in RIM’s history.

What’s going on here? For starters, RIM has been doing a full-court press in evangelizing its app platform ever since the PlayBook came out last year. A big part of the book RIM’s preaching however is about HTML5.

Put simply, HTML5 is a way to create apps so they’ll run in a mobile browser — pretty much any mobile browser. HTML5 lets developers create apps without having to worry so much about what device is running it. However, it also means the app is limited by the browser it’s running it, and it can’t really take advantage of the benefits of the device’s operating system.

RIM’s put a lot of effort into nullifying those kinds of limitations. For example, it’s created a toolkit where a developer can create an app in HTML5, then essentially put it in a “wrapper” so it’ll run natively on the PlayBook, thereby getting around the browser issue. The toolkit also has features that let apps take advantage of RIM’s BlackBerry Messenger service.

To be fair, these kinds of tools exist on other platforms (such as Android) — Brightcove’s App Cloud service is based on similar app wrappers — but RIM is throwing much more support behind HTML5 than the other major platform operators: Apple, Google and Microsoft.

That makes complete sense, since right now RIM needs all the developers it can get if it’s going to have any hope of reversing its slide and getting back into the smartphone game for real — even if that means sacrificing full-fledged native apps and encouraging developers to use tools to create apps that will also work with competing platforms.

But what will happen to RIM’s app strategy when BlackBerry 10 arrives? We hope to get some idea this week in Orlando. RIM may have intended HTML5 to be a stopgap until the real-deal BB10 apps arrive, but the campaign appears to have taken on a life of its own and could play a major role in the platform for years — assuming RIM’s still around, that is.

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Posted by Janine E. Mooney, Editor

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