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Merging personalities: RIM, Facebook tag-team keynote

Colin Gibbs

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So this is what they mean by “One show, two personalities.”

Wednesday’s keynote coupled the buttoned-down executive style of Research In Motion Ltd. with the hip, edgy verve of Facebook. Dustin Moskovitz, who co-founded the popular social networking site, unveiled a new application that delivers news feeds and messages on BlackBerry devices—the hallmark gadget of on-the-go professionals.

“All the push technology that made BlackBerry famous, and all the (social networking capabilities) that made Facebook famous, are coming together to provide a real-time expansion from the desktop” to mobile, said RIM co-CEO Mike Lazaridis, whose coat and tie contrasted with Moskovitz’s jeans and untucked shirt.

The offering allows users to create personalized notifications and alerts for Facebook messages, and T-Mobile USA will be the first carrier to offer BlackBerrys with the embedded application. Users of other carriers can download the software from Facebook’s site.

The move underscores a phenomenal expansion from Facebook in recent months. Once a destination solely for college students, the site has morphed into a place where both students and professionals can create profiles, post updates and exchange messages. Like other successful sites such as Flickr and MySpace, Facebook’s site accepts widgets for third-party applications, allowing users one-click access to other social networking destinations.

That openness is a mindset Facebook hopes to extend to mobile.

“It’s going to be big, and my bet is, it’s going to be open,” Moskovitz said of the future of wireless. “If you move now, you have an opportunity to be disruptive in the industry.”

And the announcement highlights RIM’s effort to move beyond the boardroom and into the lives of consumers. The company last year began targeting more casual users with its Pearl, a consumer-targeted device that received glowing reviews, and developers are increasingly building games and other goodies for the platform.

Facebook has made headlines recently as a potential target for acquisition by a heavyweight such as Google Inc. or Microsoft Corp. The company is expected to a stake of 5% or 10% in a deal that would value Facebook at a whopping \$15 billion.

But Facebook is facing some stiff competition in mobile. Pure-play startups such as AirG, Itsmy.com and Jumbuck have built impressive user bases by allowing members to post updates and exchange photos with other users.

Just how lucrative the mobile social networking space might be is still uncertain, however. Wireless startups are drawing impressive numbers, but some are struggling to generate the advertising revenues necessary to fuel the business. Advertisers new to the space are opting to allocate their ad dollars to more familiar, high-profile brands instead of newcomers whose names may not be recognizable by mainstream consumers.

“What you’ll see is that the better-known entities are out there not having as hard of a time selling their inventories, whereas the new companies are having a little bit of a harder time because it’s a new medium for advertisers,” according to Chris Arens, director of marketing for Ad Infuse Inc., a San Francisco-based mobile marketing startup. “That’s the biggest struggle in what we’re trying to do right now. Not all the (mobile) traffic is going to what has historically been the big online giants. That’s just an education issue.”