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Slow Android Wear sales underline challenges Google and its partners face

The Android smart watch's time may not yet have come: Despite heavy promotion of Android Wear, Google's hardware partners, including LG Electronics, Motorola Mobility and Samsung Electronics, only shipped 720,000 of the devices last year.

by Mikael Ricknäs , IDG News Service | 12 Feb 15

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The Android smart watch's time may not yet have come: Despite heavy promotion of Android Wear, Google's hardware partners, including LG Electronics, Motorola Mobility and Samsung Electronics, only shipped 720,000 of the devices last year.

With the arrival of products such as Motorola's hotly anticipated Moto 360, the smartwatch market was expected to take off. But the data from market research company Canalys shows that consumers are still far from convinced that they need buy one.

"Android Wear will need to improve significantly in the future, and we believe it will do so," said Daniel Matte, analyst at Canalys.

Those improvements have to happen across the board, including a better user interface and improved battery life, according to Francisco Jeronimo, research director for European mobile devices at IDC.

"I use a lot of mobile devices, and found the Android Wear interface difficult to learn. And when I finally had learned how to use it, I really didn't like the experience," he said.

Battery life is also a concern, and one that can't be easily solved. The arrival of customized chipsets will help but that can't change the size of smartwatches, which means you can only use a small battery.

"It will take several years before battery life improves," Jeronimo said.

Some vendors are also tripping up themselves and users with their design choices. For example, users of Samsung's smartwatches need a cradle to fill an empty battery, instead of plugging a charger directly into the device. That just adds an extra level of complexity for users, according to Jeronimo.

However, the biggest obstacle isn't these technical constraints, but that Google, vendors and application developers haven't come up with a reason why consumers should invest in an Android Wear smartwatch, Jeronimo said.

With these shortcomings Android Wear hasn't been able to dominate the smartwatch market in the way Google's platform has taken over smartphones.

Rival Pebble shipped a total of 1 million units from its 2013 launch through to the end of 2014. Continual software updates, more apps in its app store and price cuts in the fall helped maintain strong sales in the second half of the year, according to Canalys.

But all eyes are now on Apple and its Watch, which is scheduled to go on sale in April. Jeronimo goes so far as to say the future of smartwatches now rests on Apple's shoulders.

"If Apple can't get it right it may kill the category, because if Apple can't succeed which company can," he said.

Apple's CEO Tim Cook seems convinced the Watch can deliver, saying that users will find enough features to not be able to live without one, he said this week. Just as the company changed the markets for MP3 players, smartphones and tablets, Apple's Watch will change the smartwatch market.

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