29 October 2013 Last updated at 10:03 ET

Samsung tools aim to help its smart devices stand out

By Richard Taylor North America Technology Correspondent

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-24724581

Samsung has unveiled a raft of new software tools to help developers create apps specifically designed for its devices.

The South Korean firm is releasing five new software development kits (SDKs).

It said they would make it easier to create programs that can share content on its phones, tablets and TVs.

The company announced the news in San Francisco at its first developer conference. It is already the best-selling Android device manufacturer.

Samsung wants to defend that position by ensuring new software takes advantage of its devices' proprietary features, such as support for its S Pen stylus and its Multi Window function, which allows two apps to be run in split-screen mode.

"Consumers want the best possible experience," Samsung senior vice-president Curtis Sasaki told the BBC.

"So part of our job is to get developers excited about supporting all of our new features. That ends up benefiting the consumer with much better applications.

"We're hoping that innovation happens outside of the company. That's why we have developers from 33 different countries."

Stand-out smart devices

In holding a developer conference, Samsung follows the lead of other companies including Apple, Google, Microsoft and Blackberry.

All are seeking to offer unique software features to help their platforms stand out.

In the past couple of years Samsung has overtaken Apple to become the world's top-selling smartphone maker.

But unlike Apple and Blackberry - which develop both their own hardware and the operating systems that power it - Samsung relies on a third-party OS, Android, which is engineered by Google.

The same software is also used by many of Samsung's competitors, including Sony, HTC and LG.

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Although Samsung adds its own TouchWiz user interface to the system, its use of Google's OS means its customers may find it relatively easy to migrate to other Android devices when they decide to upgrade.

It also means that customers who purchase apps after they buy a device typically funnel revenue to Google rather than Samsung itself, a situation the Asian company is keen to address.

To do so, Samsung has developed a multi-pronged approach.

In terms of hardware, it is trying to build an ecosystem in which one device relies on another. This is the case with its recently launched Galaxy Gear smartwatch, which is only being made compatible with the company's Galaxy Note, Mega and S handsets.

On the software side, Samsung is entering into partnerships with developers to offer exclusives.

These include Twitter's new tablet-optimised app, which currently only works with the Galaxy Note 10.1, and Pandora's multiscreen music app, which allows Galaxy handset owners to pick songs and then play them through one of Samsung's Smart TVs.

Dawn of Tizen

The electronics giant is also working with chip maker Intel to develop a new open source operating system called Tizen.

Tizen did not feature prominently in Samsung's San Francisco event, but it is seen as part of a long-term strategy to give the company more flexibility in the way it develops relationships with its customers.

Tizen is also attractive to developers, as it promises to run software written in the HTML5 web language smoothly.

Mozilla's Firefox OS also relies on HTML5, offering developers the prospect of cross-platform compatibility in which they can write a single version of their app for multiple operating systems, helping cut costs and coding time.

HTML5-based apps can also be made to work on Android and iOS. But developers, including Google and Facebook, faced performance issues when they released products using it, and later switched to native versions.

The first handsets running Tizen were expected to be out by the end of this year, but that date has now slipped. They are expected to be aimed at the lower end of the smartphone market rather than premium models.

Samsung has previously hinted at greater ambitions for the Tizen OS, indicating it might feature in everything from TVs to systems for car infotainment (media content mixing information with entertainment).

There has also been speculation that Samsung could take another tack by "forking" away from the Google-released version of Android.

This would involve it developing its own version of Android, which would no longer offer all the search company's services.

So, for instance, it might only support the Samsung Apps and Hub marketplaces but not the Play equivalents - preventing Google from taking a cut of sales.

To date, Amazon is the only company to have succeeded in doing something similar, with its Kindle Fire tablets.

But that has come at a price. Some developers have not made the necessary tweaks to make their software compatible with Amazon's customised version of Android, Fire OS.

Samsung may feel it has the clout to pull off a similar feat in the future - but unless it can build compelling alternatives to Google's own services, it risks alienating its consumer base rather than fostering the loyalty it craves.