Apple Unveils ‘Cloud’ Music and Storage Service

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Published: June 6, 2011

SAN FRANCISCO — Declaring that the personal computer was no longer the central hub of people’s digital lives, Steven P. Jobs, Apple’s chief executive, on Monday unveiled the company’s new online storage and syncing service for music, photos, files and software.

The new, free service, iCloud, will simplify how people manage content and apps across devices, and end the PC-centric era of computing, Mr. Jobs said.

It will automatically store on Apple’s servers many of the new files that a person loads onto a Mac, iPad or iPhone, and then make those files available on any other Apple devices owned by the same person.

Mr. Jobs said people will no longer have to manually sync mobile devices with their PCs, an approach that he said has become too unruly now that millions of people own music players, smartphones and tablets, each with photos, music, apps and other types of documents.

“Keeping these devices in sync is driving us crazy,” Mr. Jobs said, speaking on the opening day of Apple’s Worldwide Developers Conference here. “We have a great solution for this problem. We are going to demote the PC to just be a device. We are going to move the digital hub, the center of your digital life, into the cloud.”

“Everything happens automatically, and there is nothing new to learn,” he added.

At the center of iCloud is a new version of iTunes that will allow users to download on any device any song they have ever bought. Songs on a person’s iTunes library that were not bought from Apple can be added for $25 a year, Mr. Jobs said.
The iTunes in the Cloud service is available now. The other iCloud services will be available in the fall, when Apple releases the new version of its mobile operating system, iOS 5.

The iCloud service also works with documents, apps and photos through a new service, Photo Stream, that automatically uploads photos taken with an iPhone or iPad. And it will replace MobileMe, a failed $99-a-year service that allowed people to synchronize their calendar, e-mail and contacts across devices.

At the event, other top Apple executives showcased new versions of the Macintosh and iOS operating systems, which include scores of new features. But most attention was on the iCloud services, which analysts and industry insiders said would have more lasting impact on consumers, and were superior to and reached beyond those of competitors.

“This is a milestone in computing,” said Mike McCue, a veteran Silicon Valley executive who now heads Flipboard, a popular news app for iPhone and iPads. “The fact that you no longer have to think in terms of files and folders is a big deal.”

Mr. McCue said that while other services, like Dropbox, allow users to access files across devices, Apple's solution is simpler. “It doesn’t feel like a techie thing at all,” he said.

Others said they worried that iCloud would strengthen the position of Apple, which has long been criticized for controlling its mobile devices too tightly. Although some of iCloud’s features will work with non-Apple PCs, the service will tie Apple’s gadgets more closely together, giving the company more power to dictate terms to developers and users.

“The new services from Apple are a step in the right direction but only if all your devices are Apple devices,” said Ben Drury, chief executive of 7Digital, a digital music company in Britain. “Their platform is essentially closed and proprietary — customers are forced into choosing Apple for all their devices.”

A linchpin of iTunes in the Cloud, as the new music service is called, is that Apple has reached deals with the major record labels and music publishers to license their recordings. Amazon and Google offer similar music services.

But because those two companies did not obtain licenses from the labels, users have to upload their own music libraries — and any new song purchases — to the Web before they can access them on other devices. The process can take hours, if not days, for people with large collections.

By cementing the deals with the music industry, Apple can save users that time-consuming step. What is more, Apple, which is already the world's largest distributor of music, is expected to find a ready audience in its millions of iTunes users, virtually guaranteeing that its service will leapfrog the offerings from Amazon and Google.

“Yes, Google and Amazon get to say that they were first,” said Mike McGuire, a media analyst at Gartner. “But what often happens to the people who were first is that they get the arrows in their backs.”

Mr. McGuire said Apple's service was superior. “When you buy something new, it’s now automatically on all of your devices. You don’t have to think about it,” he said.

The new mobile operating system features include services that make it easier to post items like photos on Twitter, and a Newsstand service where people will have access to all their newspaper and magazine subscriptions. Apple is also revamping the iOS camera,
its Safari browser and e-mail software.

Apple is reducing the price of its new Mac operating system, to $29 from $129 and adding features. That new operating system will automatically save all documents that a person is working on, and will bring the flavor of Apple's mobile devices to the Macintosh.

For instance, a new Launch Pad service displays applications in small icons much as they appear on an iPad, and the trackpad recognizes additional multi-touch commands that are common on Apple’s touch-screen devices. The new Mac operating system will be available in July.

As on previous recent occasions, Mr. Jobs, who is on medical leave, appeared gaunt Monday. The crowd of about 1,500 Apple developers, who lined up around a city block to enter the Moscone Center West in downtown San Francisco, cheered wildly when Mr. Jobs walked onto the stage.

And while he did not address his health, when a person in the crowd shouted, “We love you,” he responded, “It always helps, and I appreciate it.”

*Ben Sisario contributed reporting from New York.*
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