

Facebook plays to social ties with Portal smart-screen

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A Facebook Portal Mini product is seen on display during a media event held in San Francisco

Facebook on Wednesday unveiled second-generation Portal smart screens, touting them as a way to stay connected to loved ones at the

leading social network.

Facebook also pushed down costs to make new Portal, Portal Mini, and Portal TV devices more enticing to consumers at a starting price of \$129.

Portal and Portal Mini will begin shipping on October 15, while a notepad-sized Portal TV [device](#) that turns a television into a smart screen for video calls and more will begin shipping on November 5 at a price of \$149.

Facebook would not disclose how many Portal devices have been sold since they were introduced late last year, but said adoption has been strong enough to inspire second-generation models.

Shipments of smart speakers in the US last year nearly doubled to 57.5 million, with Amazon accounting for about 48 percent of the market and Google claiming nearly 39 percent, according to International Data Corp.

Amazon Echo and Google Nest [smart devices](#) use their respective digital assistant software to infuse in-home speakers and screens with voice-commanded intelligence.

"We know the smart device category is packed and competitive; and those devices are great," Facebook augmented and virtual reality vice president Andrew "Boz" Bosworth said while providing a look at the Portal line-up.

"But, Portal is the only device that is going to connect you with people you care about; and I would contend that any smart device that doesn't do that isn't that smart at all."



Facebook says its Portal smart screen is part of its efforts to help people stay connected

Calling WhatsApp

Amazon Echo Show and Google Nest smart screens can be used to make video calls, but Portal is tied into connections at Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp, which is encrypted end-to-end.

The Facebook-owned messaging apps as well as the social network itself are each used by more than a billion people monthly.

"This is not about the world needs another Echo Show or the world needs another Google Nest Hub, this is a product that serves a very

specific purpose and is messaged accordingly, that's the person-to-person interaction," Gartner personal technologies research director Werner Goertz said at the briefing.

Mindful that internet users have become wary of their privacy at Facebook, features built into Portal include physical switches to turn off cameras and microphones.

Covers can be slid over camera lenses, and data from cameras and microphones is processed on devices instead of on data centers in the cloud.

Facebook's system knows which parties are being connected on [video calls](#), but doesn't listen to what is said, Facebook executives said.

Portal users will be able to opt out of having snippets of voice commands stored and reviewed to improve the software's grasp of spoken words, according to Bosworth.



A Facebook Portal TV remote control is seen on display during a media event held in San Francisco

TV and games

Portal TV features include using augmented reality for funny looks and playing games such as boat-sinking classic "Battleship," along with the ability to watch Amazon Prime shows with far-away friends or family.

The voice-commanded smart screens can also be used for other online television apps or for streaming music services such as Pandora and Spotify.

Facebook said its advertising system would know little about Portal

users, and that it had no plans at this time to weave money-making marketing into the video-calling service.

"This product is the core essence of what Facebook does; it connects you with the very people you care most about," Bosworth said.

Portal digital aide software works alongside Amazon virtual assistant Alexa, which also provides software brains for Echo devices.

Facebook was also expanding Portal available from just Canada and the US to include Australia, Britain, France, Italy, New Zealand, and Spain.

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