

Mobile congress opens in Spain with tight virus rules

June 28 2021, by Daniel Silva and Emmanuelle Michel



"We are back to business," Mats Granryd, director general of the industry association that stages the congress, the GSMA, said in an opening address.

A scaled-back version of the world's biggest mobile telecommunications

fair got underway Monday in Spain under tight virus controls, with top firms avoiding an in-person presence after the pandemic derailed last year's edition.

Spain's King Felipe V and Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez were on hand for the opening of the four-day Mobile World Congress (MWC) in Barcelona, one of the first big technology conferences staged in Europe since the start of the pandemic.

"We are back to business, we are back to Barcelona, we are back together," Mats Granryd, director general of the industry association that stages the [congress](#), the GSMA, said in an opening address.

The event, which is usually held in February, is taking place this year both in-person at Barcelona's main conference centre as well as digitally, with an online appearance by tech billionaire Elon Musk on Tuesday among the highlights.

Participants will only be allowed into the congress if they have a negative COVID-19 test result which is less than 72 hours old and will have to sign a daily declaration that they are in good health.

People lined up outside a testing site at the congress throughout the day to determine if they could be allowed in.

Once inside they must wear medical-grade FFP2 face masks at all times—lighter surgical masks are not allowed—and follow a one-way walking system, although arrows on the floor indicating which direction to follow were largely ignored.

Organisers have limited attendance to 50,000 as part of virus control measures, compared with a normal attendance of around 100,000. They expect 30,000-35,000 people to actually attend.

'Bit of reluctance'

"It's a great success on the part of organisers to be able to stage the event. Even if there was a bit of reluctance on the part of firms and visitors to come," said Samuel Norca, a mobile consultant with US firm Amplitude who came from Paris for the congress.

The fair occupies just three halls of the congress centre this year, compared to eight in the past, with hand sanitiser dispensers distributed throughout the site.

Many major firms like Samsung, the world's top smartphone maker, Nokia, Google and Facebook have pulled out of the in-person event, citing virus concerns although some will take part virtually.

China's beleaguered Huawei, whose smartphone business has been battered by US sanctions, will be the biggest handset maker with a physical presence at the show alongside telecoms operators such as Orange and Telefonica.

Unlike in other years, no major phonemaker is scheduled to present a new flagship device at the event, although some smaller Chinese firms unveiled new devices.

Chinese electronics manufacturer TCL showcased its new budget smartphone while Lenovo presented several new tablets.

Rising sales

The congress comes as global smartphone sales are rebounding after slumping in 2020 due to the economic havoc caused by the pandemic.

Global smartphone sales fell by 5.9 percent in 2020 to a total of 1.29 billion units, its fourth straight year of declines, according to research firm IDC.

But IDC forecasts they will increase by 7.7 percent this year, and continue to rise until 2025 due to pent-up demand for a new device in rich nations and a faster than expected recovery in key emerging markets.

The greater availability of super-fast 5G wireless networks is also expected to encourage consumers to purchase new smartphones.

By the end of 2025 more than two in five people around the world will live within reach of a 5G network, the GSMA said in a new report published Monday to coincide with the start of the congress.

Global tech show CES, held annually in January in Las Vegas, was held virtually this year because of the pandemic.

Organisers of the IFA consumer technology trade fair in Berlin have cancelled their September event, saying the pandemic made it impossible to stage an in-person show.

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