

## **After 12-year wait, Sony relaunches robot dog Aibo to much fanfare**

Sony Corp. relaunched the Aibo on Thursday, with fans expressing excitement at the second unleashing of the digital robot dog.

The gadget's revival is not just a simple product relaunch but a symbol of Sony's recent resurgence as it vies to play a leading role in the robot market expected to bloom in the coming years, analysts said.

"It's been about a year and half since we started developing the new Aibo . . . the day where we can provide it to new owners with confidence has finally come," said Izumi Kawanishi, who oversees Sony's artificial intelligence and robotics group, at a promotional event held at Sony's headquarters in Tokyo.

New owners who received their Aibos at the event did not hesitate to show their joy.

"I was very happy to finally get my Aibo," said an owner who only identified himself as Yamashita.

"Apparently this Aibo 'grows,' so it will be interesting to see how my relationship with Aibo might change as it develops. Aibo might not take a liking to me at first, but I hope it gets attached to me over time," he said.

The 29-cm-tall, 2.2-kg robot is equipped with deep learning technology to analyze information collected by various sensors and cameras. It recognizes owners' faces and reacts differently depending on how deeply they have communicated over time. Such communication data is stored in a cloud-based service.

Aibo debuted in 1999, quickly attracting an avid group of fans. Sony sold about 150,000 units of the mechanical pet until it withdrew from the business in 2006 due to low profits.

"This is our third Aibo, and we'd been looking forward to buying this one for a long time. We were also happy to hear that the robot business was making a comeback," said another new owner who only gave his family name, Satouchi.

Sony picked Jan. 11, a date that can be represented by the number sequence "one, one, one," because it resembles the Japanese onomatopoeia for a barking dog (wan wan), while 2018 is the Year of the Dog under the Chinese lunar calendar.

Kawanishi said Sony plans to release the new Aibo overseas as well but refrained from commenting on specifics.

Some may wonder why Aibo is being given a second chance, but analysts said several factors have made the time ripe for Sony.

“On top of the fact that AI and robots are booming trends now, Sony’s earnings have been recovering,” said Toshiro Sato, director at Kyokuto Securities Research Institute.

The tech industry is indeed becoming more keen on AI and robots. SoftBank Group Corp. has developed the entertainment robot Pepper and Sharp Corp. has produced the chatty Robohon robot phone.

Plus, Sony has gotten itself out of the business slump lately and now forecasts a record operating profit of ¥630 billion for the current year. Thus, it is a good time for Sony to jump back into the market, Sato said.

In June 2016, Sony said it would make “new proposals” for living-environment products equipped with its AI, robotics and communications technologies.

Kanae Maita, principal analyst at Gartner Japan, said Sony must have been seeking the perfect time to relaunch its robot business.

“There are now many producers of entertainment robots but I believe Sony sees itself as a leading maker” because it cultivated the market with Aibo back in 1999, she said. Therefore, “Sony probably thought now is the time and that it might be too late if they waited,” she said.

With the revival of Aibo, which is viewed as Sony’s signature robot product, the electronics company also appears to be sending a message that it is ready to compete in a market that is likely to expand and that it still has what it takes to make products that can excite, analysts said.

As for the Aibo’s potential as a business, Sato said it probably won’t be as big in terms of a direct contribution to earnings.

The robot is priced at ¥198,000 and owners will also need to pay ¥90,000 up front (or ¥2,980 a month) for the minimum three-year plan to access the cloud-based services that allow the dog to learn tricks and get accustomed to its environment.

Even if Sony sells 150,000 units, the same number as the original models, the returns won’t be too significant for a major company like Sony, Sato said.

Yet Maita and Sato both said Aibo can collect data including owners’ conversations that will be useful for future products.