



PROGRAMMING PEPPER. SoftBank Corp's robot Pepper performs during a press conference in Maihama, near Tokyo. Pepper has a hairless head, no legs, and moves on wheels. (AP Photo/Shizuo Kambayashi)

Softbank's childlike robot with 'heart' goes on sale

By Yuri Kageyama
AP Business Writer

URAYASU, Japan — Technology company Softbank's Pepper robot has gone on sale in Japan, equipped with a "heart" designed to not only recognize human emotions but react with simulations of anger, joy, and irritation.

The robot, which has no legs and moves on wheels, was shown to reporters and guests at a Tokyo area theater. It has a hairless head and moving arms and went through a year of software development after first being announced.

Pepper glided proudly on to the stage, conversed with celebrity guests such as Alibaba founder Jack Ma, did a dance, sang a birthday song, and demonstrated how it could record family life in photos and serve as a companion. It appeared to respond with joy when it was praised or stroked.

Softbank Corp. CEO Masayoshi Son said the company was preparing for a global sales launch with partners Alibaba Group of China and FoxConn of Taiwan, which will each take a 20 percent stake in Softbank's robotics unit and help with software and manufacturing.

Details of when and where it will go on sale outside Japan are still undecided, but Son said the first overseas sales will likely happen next year, with experimental sales likely happening later this year. It sells for 198,000 yen (\$1,600) in Japan.

According to Son, the robot will develop its own personality of sorts, depending on what family owns it and how people interact with it. Pepper can remember faces and is programmed to be happy when it is given attention, but becomes irritated and depressed when it is not.

Son gushed with emotion himself when explaining to reporters and guests what was in store for Pepper, stressing the company's commitment to robots, especially smart robots that can provide emotional interaction in everyday life.

He said the inspiration for Pepper came from his childhood memories of Astro Boy, an animated Japanese character which did not have a heart and could not understand why people cried. He made a point of programming Pepper to look like it weeps: lights well up in its round eyes.

Although he acknowledged some may not agree with the idea of making robots that appeared to have human traits, he said such technology could be transformative.

The world already has robots that help in manufacturing, and mankind has already made the car and the plane, but what it needs is love, he said with a straight face.

"Our vision is to offer a robot with love," he said.

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Cat stationmaster Tama mourned in Japan, elevated as goddess

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Tama the stationmaster, Japan's feline star of a struggling local railway, was mourned by company officials and fans and elevated into a goddess at a recent funeral.

The calico cat was appointed stationmaster at the Kishi station in western Japan in 2007. Donning her custom-made stationmaster's cap, Tama quietly sat at the ticket gate welcoming and seeing off passengers. The cat quickly attracted tourists and became world famous, contributing to the railway company and local economy.

Tama, who had turned 16 in April, died of heart failure on June 22. During the Shinto-style funeral at the station where she served, Tama became a goddess. The Shinto religion, indigenous to Japan and practiced by many Japanese, has a variety of gods, including animals.

In one of several portraits decorating the altar, Tama posed in a stationmaster's hat and a dark blue cape. Saké, as well as watermelon, apples, cabbage, and other fruits and vegetables were presented to the cat. A stand outside the station was heaped with bouquets, canned tuna, and other gifts left by thousands of Tama fans who came to pray from around the country.

Wakayama Electric Railway president Mitsunobu Kojima thanked the cat for her achievement, and said Tama will be enshrined at a nearby cat shrine in August.

Before Tama's arrival, the local Kishigawa Line was near-bankrupt; and the station was unmanned as it had lost its last staff.

Kojima said appointing Tama as stationmaster was initially an excuse to keep the cat at the station.

"But she was really doing her job," he said. The rest was a miracle, and his company's success story also gave hope for dozens of other struggling tiny local train lines, he said.

"Tama-chan really emerged like a savior, a goddess. It was truly my honor to have been able to work with her," Kojima said in his speech.

During her tenure, Tama contributed an estimated 1.1 billion yen (\$8.9 million) to the local economy, Kojima



FAMOUS FELINE. Tama the stationmaster, Japan's feline star of a struggling local railway, receives a birthday cake on her 16th birthday in Kinokawa, Wakayama prefecture, western Japan, in this April 29, 2015 file photo. Tama was mourned by company officials and fans and elevated into a goddess at a funeral last month. Tama died of heart failure on June 22, 2015. (Kyodo News via AP, File)

said.

Kojima said that when he visited Tama at an animal hospital the day before she died, the cat woke up and reached out to him with her paws, as if asking for a hug, and looked straight into his eyes. He said he told Tama to get well so they could celebrate the cat's upcoming 10th anniversary as a stationmaster, and said the cat responded with a "meow."

Tama is a popular name for cats in Japan, where they are considered spiritual animals. The word also translates as treasure, ball, or spirit.

The cat had climbed the corporate ladder from stationmaster to "ultra-stationmaster" and vice president of the company before receiving the additional title of "honorable eternal stationmaster."

Tama will be succeeded by another calico cat, Nitama, now an apprentice stationmaster.

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