The name iRobot might not be as well-known as its main product, the Roomba, which has been made popular in part by shows like American Dad, Arrested Development and Gilmore Girls. Did you put googly eyes on the Roomba? I just find my housekeeper, but I’ve already found a replacement. You know if we died right now and decomposed, it would vacuum us up. The company just launched some big updates to its product line, including a new mopping robot called the Braava jet m6. It also will soon release a lawn mowing robot named Terra.

iRobot is building a complete home cleaning robot fleet so you never have to mow, mop or vacuum again. But since the beginning, iRobot has dealt with competition and knockoffs — lots of them. And now, with higher tariffs on goods produced in China, iRobot has to stay more vigilant than ever. CNBC got an inside look at its lab to see the latest products in development and to learn more about its goal to have a self-cleaning home filled with robots to take care of our dirty work.

iRobot has had a material impact on the market by creating it, in my opinion. The Roomba began cleaning homes in 2002, but iRobot was quite busy before then. iRobot was founded back in 1990 based on the notion that it was about time that these robots that we had been promised became a reality. When Colin Angle co-founded iRobot, the company was focused on military robots. It then started making toy robots and lessons from both led the company to create the first robotic vacuum.

Everyone thought of Rosie the Robot from The Jetsons and this idea that the thing that robots were supposed to do for us in our everyday life was clean the house. It wasn’t hard for us to recognize that this was a good idea, we just didn’t know how to do it. And the Roomba actually was the coming together of technologies from work we had done in the toy industry, learning to make low cost complicated devices; from the defense industry, where we had designed algorithms that would allow a robot to go sweep a minefield. And so the algorithms on Roomba that make sure it goes everywhere in the room actually were mine-hunting algorithms. A couple of years later in 2002, we launched the first Roomba. Roomba robotic floor vac. If it’s down there, we’ll get it. This is the original Roomba called Scamp. It wasn’t yet a vacuum. It had a little bit of a sweeping system on the inside. Here’s the original Roomba.

This was the first Roomba that was launched and sold. Worldwide sales of consumer robots reached 5.6 billion dollars in 2018, and it’s expected to reach 19 billion dollars by the end of 2025. And that’s in no small part thanks to iRobot, which has a market cap of 2.5 billion. iRobot is one of the first companies to offer a product that does the automation of domestic tasks in the home. And so, I think it is a market leader. It is a pioneer. And people get really attached to these autonomous cleaning machines. Humans have an amazing ability to anthropomorphize almost anything. Probably within three weeks, 90 percent of Roombas have been given a name or are called Roomba as if it were their name, and a bond appears. We’ll get these phone calls to customer service. My Roomba is broken. Send it back we’ll send you a new one. No. No, I’m not sending you Rosie. Can’t you send out an ambulance? Which is a bit different from most consumer-product interactions. The newest addition to the iRobot family of cleaners is the Braava jet m6, a mopping robot that has a larger tank and improved connectivity over its predecessor. For the first time ever, we have what we call our iAdapt 3.0 navigation technology. So not only does it map your home, it also learns your home. We’ve expanded the range, so now instead of cleaning a single room, it can actually clean your whole home up to 1000 square feet. And we have much larger pads and much better cleaning performance. This is the wet single-use pad and the robot automatically knows what kind of pad is on there, so it’ll have the correct behavior. If it’s a dry sweeping pad, it knows obviously enough to spray water. If it’s a wet pad, it knows to spray, but it also knows to notify you if you don’t have water in the tank. Some concerns about privacy have been raised, though, as newer iRobot products map a user’s house in order to clean it more accurately, and that data can make consumers uneasy. Privacy concerns associated with these household robots are common across all consumer electronics.

So, in order for Roomba to vacuum the kitchen, it actually needs to know where the kitchen is. And, you know, that’s some information which the users need to feel in control of. If you don’t want us to collect the data in the first place, you don’t have to go give us permission to do so. The robot just won’t know where your kitchen is. It will still vacuum very, very well. But now more than ever, between the long list of similar, cheaper products, and the escalating trade battle with China, iRobot has to make sure consumers know what sets its products apart from the long list of similar products.

Naturally, there have been copycats. So, the question for iRobot is, how does it maintain a distinct competitive advantage with its existing product line, and how does it continue to expand into other product lines? 25 percent of all money spent on vacuum cleaners are now spent on robot vacuum cleaners. The Roomba is the number one selling vacuum cleaner in the United States, which is amazing. And of course, that’s invited in and attracted copycats and competition into the marketplace. One of the lessons that our competition always learns very quickly is that building a robot is really hard. Trying to build a robot at lower prices often leads to robots that don’t have the durability or effectiveness. Perhaps even it might worthwhile to explore other products that would be integrated into these products, just like what Apple has done with its products, to be able to make a very high barrier to switching over to other competing products. iRobot has had to deal with tariffs before, in 2018 when the U.S. enacted a 10 percent tariff on products produced in China. Back then, iRobot decided to absorb the higher cost of its products, but today it might have to find another way. The tariffs and the recent increase is very challenging for the consumer robot industry. You know, these tariffs are not free, they’re not paid by China. They’re largely paid by the U.S. consumer. That makes this great new technology more expensive and slows down the growth of this new industry. iRobot continues to innovate through the challenges. Along with the new Braava mop, iRobot has also previewed Terra, its lawn mowing robot which will start selling in Germany this year and will enter beta testing in the U.S. this year as well. Terra is finally, we’ve been working on this thing for 10 years, is finally launching. With these three horsemen, the Roomba, the Braava and the Terra robots, we could see a much larger business in a few years. Companion robots have revolutionized many things, from cleaning our houses to mowing our lawns to keeping us company. And iRobot wants to stay at the forefront of this revolution. We’ve created a new level of intelligence because we know where we are and we’re starting to know where things are. It’s like a whole new chapter in robotics was just begun. And so for me, for iRobot, it’s a very interesting time.

Did you put googly eyes – ты положил большие глаза?

found a replacement - нашел замену

you know if we died right now and decomposed - знаешь, если бы мы умерли прямо сейчас и разложились.

release a lawn mowing robot- выпустить робота для стрижки газонов

fleet so – так что

have to mow, mop or vacuum again – нужно косить, мыть пол и пылесосить

has dealt with competition and knockoffs - имеет дело с конкуренцией и подделками.

stay more vigilant - быть бдительнее

an inside look at its lab - взглянуть на лабораторию изнутри

latest products in development - новейшие разработки

a self-cleaning home filled with robots - самоочищающийся дом, полный роботов.

material impact on the market - существенное влияние на рынок

quite busy before then - был очень занят до этого

based on the notion - основываясь на представлении.

algorithms that would allow a robot to go sweep a minefield - алгоритмы, которые позволили бы роботу прочесать минное поле

sweeping system on the inside - система подметания изнутри

people get really attached - люди очень привязываются

anthropomorphize almost anything- персонифицировать практически все

send out an ambulance - пришлите скорую помощь

mopping robot – моющий робот

predecessor – предшественник

expanded the range - расширил ассортимент

now instead of cleaning - теперь вместо того, чтобы убирать

cleaning performance - эффективность уборки

the correct behavior - правильное поведение

knows obviously enough - очевидно, знает достаточно.

common across all consumer electronics - общее для всей бытовой электроники

copycats – подражатели

maintain a distinct competitive advantage - сохранять явное конкурентное преимущество

durability or effectiveness - долговечность или эффективность

worthwhile to explore - стоит исследовать

competing products - конкурирующие товары  
decided to absorb the higher cost - решил взять на себя более высокую стоимость

recent increase - недавнее увеличение

Along with – вместе с

lawn mowing robot - робот для стрижки газонов

keeping us company - составить нам компанию

stay at the forefront - оставаться на переднем крае