



# The Race to Build Another Tablet

New tablet manufacturers are trying to corner niche markets, not compete against the iPad

The Apple iPad has cornered the tablet market. Sales of the multimedia miracle account for 95 per cent of all tablets sold. I, however, say that's about to change.

Apple's not the only company building tablets. Others have been in the game just as long. It's just that most of the early tablets were like computers without keyboards. They were too big, too heavy, limited in battery life and, well, not exactly "ubiquitous." The iPad changed all that. It proved that there's a market after all for tablet devices. Now other companies are racing to fill niche demands.

After all, the iPad is not without its problems. It's excellent for playing short multimedia clips — audio and video are great — but cumbersome when watching full-length TV shows and movies. More importantly to business users, the iPad is lousy when creating content. Ever tried writing letters, documents or spreadsheets while using a non-ergonomic, glass-tablet keyboard? Think about it. It's like writing on a menu with your fingers.

But these are pointless quibbles. The iPad is not a conventional device. I may as well argue for propellers on my car or wheels on my boat.

But that hasn't stopped other manufacturers from racing to fill niche markets. Hewlett-Packard (HP), Research in Motion (RIM), Samsung and CherryPal each have different takes on what end users want from tablet devices. Samsung's Galaxy Tab (to be released in late 2010) features a nice balance between multimedia applications for consumers and content creation for business users, which has been a weakness of the iPad. It includes USB ports for keyboards and data entry devices.

HP, on the other hand, is exploring solutions to the problem of compatibility with Windows-based applications. The HP Slate 500 (to be released in the first quarter of 2011) will run Windows 7, providing corporate users with the opportunity to create and modify the same files used in their workplaces. Think about the ramifications of a tablet that collected data while out in the field. The chance to complete audit checklists within write-up packages such as CaseWare makes many accountants drool.

Research In Motion's PlayBook (also to be released in the first quarter of 2011) will put a fresh spin on corporate communications: the PlayBook "tethers" to your BlackBerry, routing all telecommunications through a device that offers a seven inch screen rather than the relatively tiny screen of the BlackBerry.

Users will be able to easily monitor their email, browse the web, create Windows-based documents and basically do anything currently allowed through the technology of the BlackBerry Enterprise Server. And the PlayBook will fit easily inside your luggage and overcoat.

None of these competitors, however, can match the battery capacity of the iPad. Hands down, the iPad is the winner at 10-12 hours of average use before recharging. Samsung's Galaxy Tab claims seven hours of video playback, 10 hours if used for less strenuous tasks, while most Windows 7 devices collapse to about four to six hours, depending upon a variety of intangibles.

To be fair, one of the reasons for Apple's high performance is the absence of extras such as USB ports, VGA adapters, SD memory card sockets and cameras. These accessories draw power from the unit itself and drain resources. So if you need the convenience of various ports, you'll pay for it in battery performance.

What about size and portability?

Many of the coming tablets will be smaller than the iPad — chiefly to alleviate portability problems. Samsung and RIM believe that their target users want tablets with screens that are larger than conventional smartphones but overall dimensions to allow people to stuff their products into the pockets of overcoats and satchels. These new tablets will also weigh in at less than a pound — much easier to hold than the bulky iPad if you're computing while watching an in-flight movie.

As for price, I believe it's a non-issue. CherryPal's CherryPad, for example, is lighter and smaller than the iPad but almost matches it in consumer-based capabilities. It costs about US\$200, almost half the price of an iPad. The HP Slate gets dissed because its expected introductory price is about US\$800 — about twice the price of a low-end iPad and just a bit more than the high-end one.

But for the business user, that price differential will be immaterial if they can hook up to their Windows-based networks and use all their standard software without having to find or program alternative tools.

Hardware reviewers typically end their columns with a conclusion that none of the new tablets will be "iPad killers." I think they're missing the boat. Look at the HP Slate and RIM PlayBook. They're targeted towards business users who need to easily attach to existing IT systems. Based on the initial releases, it looks like they might do very well — far better than the iPad is currently doing.

The new tablet manufacturers aren't trying to beat Apple at its own game. They're racing to corner other markets. **CGA**

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