

Cute, efficient Eee Top looks like future of home computing

March 25 2009, By Brier Dudley



Asus' adorable new touch-screen Eee Top desktop computer is a blast from the past. Not from the early days of computing, but the auto industry 40 years ago.

While testing the \$599 Windows XP system the past few weeks, I kept thinking of how Asian car companies upended the U.S. market in the late 1960s by introducing small, cheap and charming models such as the Toyota Corolla and Datsun 510.

They arrived just before a recession and a fuel crisis. Soon millions of people were deciding they would sacrifice power and size for efficiency.

The same thing has been happening to the PC industry since 2007, when [Asus](#) and others introduced mini-laptops at prices starting below \$300.

Dubbed netbooks, these machines generally have a 7-inch screen and low-power processors originally designed for handheld devices.

You could also call them a hit phenomenon. Lately netbooks have been the lone bright spot for PC makers, including Asian netbook pioneers and U.S. companies like Dell and Hewlett-Packard that followed suit with their own versions.

More than 10 million netbooks were sold last year, and sales are expected to double this year, according to research firm IDC.

Now Asus is building new models on the Eee platform, hoping it can bring the netbook effect to the desktop market. If the [Eee PC](#) was like a hit sedan, the [Eee Top](#) -- which went on sale March 9 -- is a station wagon or SUV built on the same chassis.

Jackie Hsu, Asus president for the Americas, said the system was deliberately designed to appeal to homemakers, as well as students and kids. He also hopes companies will use Eee Top at receptionist desks, where visitors can sign themselves in using its touch screen.

Hsu believes the Eee line can take 10 to 15 percent of the desktop market, matching the Eee PC's share of [laptop](#) sales.

Asus is also pursuing another emerging segment of the PC market with the Eee Top: all-in-one computers that serve as a family computing hub, or in-home Internet kiosk and e-mail station.

There are suddenly lots of interesting choices if you're looking for one of these systems.

HP has expanded the category with its TouchSmart desktops. They're full-blown PCs with powerful processors and more-refined touch applications, but they're also much larger and start at around \$1,100.

Sony is now selling lovely all-in-one Vaio systems, but they also start at about \$1,000 and don't have touch screens.

Next month Dell is entering the race with a svelte 19-inch model called the Studio One 19. It will start at \$699 and include a built-in DVD drive, improved graphics and Windows Vista. But a touch screen will add \$200 to the price.

Then there's the BMW of the bunch, Apple's influential iMac. It also lacks touch and starts at \$1,200 - twice the price of an Eee Top.

Compared with those systems, the Eee Top is a bargain. It's the lowest-price touch-screen desktop by a mile, and has some premium features, including 802.11n Wi-Fi and a gigabit Ethernet jack. The system has a 16-inch screen, an Atom N270 processor, 1 gigabyte of RAM and a 160 gigabyte hard drive.

If you've got younger kids or space for an Eee Top in the kitchen, it will be the most-used computer your house.

Almost immediately after I plugged in a white review unit, my wife and daughters were insisting we buy one. Shortly after my mother-in-law visited, she called her husband and asked him to look into the Eee Top.

Yet I'm still on the fence about the Eee Top.

The system is cute and welcoming, like an early Mac.

Its scale feels right on a small desk or a countertop. It's like a small

kitchen appliance, although the Apple-ish keyboard is too small for me to comfortably type fast.

Touch controls are handy for scrolling through a recipe without gunking up a keyboard. You can manipulate the cursor with a finger or a stylus that pops into a hole in the keyboard.

I especially like using the Eee Top like a big-screen iPod Touch (although it's a single touch screen, instead of the more capable multi-touch technology used by Apple): Flick a finger across the screen to choose an album and tap to play through stereo speakers that can fill a room with pretty good sound.

But the lack of a built-in CD/DVD drive means the Eee Top probably won't work as the only computer in your house - unless you buy an external drive, such as the \$64 accessory drive offered by Asus.

The Eee Top's bundled touch applications are also lacking.

One is a media-playing program apparently written for PCs with an optical drive, which this one doesn't have. If you tap the "movies" icon - a DVD - it tells you to insert a disc.

There's also a special "Easy Mode" that fills the desktop with Web shortcuts - basically big buttons you tap to get recipes, the weather and other information from the Web. I can't say too much about this program because it failed repeatedly and eventually wouldn't even start.

Much better is the "Eee Bar" - a horizontal menu of favorite programs that you tap to drag across the bottom of the screen - and fun "sticky note" and webcam applications.

The Eee Top may also appeal to energy-conscious users. Asus claims the

system consumes just 25 watts on average, and it has a nice power-management tool that can turn the power settings up and down as needed.

Hsu said Asus is thinking about whether to give upcoming models a built-in DVD drive and perhaps a tuner so they can play and record TV shows.

It is also preparing to release new Eee desktops, including one this summer that will have an entire computer stuffed into a keyboard. It's also selling a \$299 Eee Box, a book-sized CPU with no monitor or optical drive.

These Atom-based wireless "nettop" desktops are so cheap we may eventually have them sprinkled all over the house. Instead of buying expensive gadgets to stream and store digital music and movies, why not just use a quiet little \$300 computer?

Eee Tops will be especially appealing later this year, when it will be available with Windows 7, which has improved touch features.

I'm just hoping to keep the Eee Top fans in my house at bay until I've seen the Dell Studio One 19 and can decide whether it's worth an extra \$300 or so.

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