

E-reader sales soaring but Apple captures the buzz

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The new Sony Reader ebook. Sales of electronic book readers are booming, companies are jostling for a share of the fledgling market and Amazon's going global with the Kindle.

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So why is all the buzz about [Apple](#)?

Because the California company behind the [Macintosh computer](#), iPhone and iPod is rumored to be coming out with a portable [tablet](#)

[computer](#) early next year that may double as an [e-reader](#).

And not just a black-and-white e-reader but one that would boast full color and a 10-inch (25-centimeter) screen making it more of an oversized [iPod Touch](#) or a netbook computer, the increasingly popular low-cost mini-laptops.

If an Apple tablet computer does emerge, it would join an e-reader market that is becoming increasingly crowded but is undergoing tremendous growth.

Besides Amazon, other companies offering e-readers include Japan's Sony, Britain's Interead, and Dutch company IREX Technologies, whose touchscreen reader with wireless capability is expected in US stores in October.

Barnes and Noble, the book giant, is among those expected to throw down the gauntlet to market leader Amazon next along with Plastic Logic, maker of a lightweight large-screen device geared towards newspaper and magazines.

Forrester Research, Inc., in a report released on Wednesday, estimated that three million e-readers would be sold in the United States this year, up from a previous forecast of two million units.

Forrester said it expected 900,000 units to be sold in the upcoming holiday season alone and for e-reader sales to double to six million units next year, bringing cumulative sales to 10 million units.

"We've been saying for some time now that this Christmas is going to be 'e-reader Christmas,'" Neil Jones, founder and chief executive of Interead, maker of the COOL-ER e-reader, told AFP.

"Our biggest challenge as an industry is making sure we have stock available for people who want to buy an e-reader," Jones said, adding that COOL-ER sales have been "three to four times ahead of our predictions."

Amazon does not release Kindle sales figures but Forrester estimated the online retail giant has a nearly 60 percent share of the US market followed by the Sony Reader with 35 percent.

Seattle-based Amazon has also finally begun looking beyond US shores, unveiling an international version of the Kindle this week designed to synch with wireless networks in 100 countries around the world.

Analysts said Amazon's dominance could be seriously challenged, however, if the rumored Apple device emerges with Forrester saying Apple could potentially "become a major player in the e-book market overnight."

Technology analyst Rob Enderle of Silicon Valley's Enderle Group agreed and said an Apple tablet computer could have ramifications beyond just e-books.

"It could be a segment killer," he said, a "Swiss Army knife of products."

"This is a combination replacement portable DVD player, e-book reader and portable Web browser," Enderle told AFP.

For the moment, the iPad or iTablet as it has been dubbed is just the subject of fevered speculation on technology blogs.

The company founded by Steve Jobs is notoriously secretive about what is being cooked up in its laboratories and zealously guards against leaks.

But Enderle and others said they were convinced a tablet priced anywhere from 450-700 dollars was on the horizon.

"Everything I heard was that Steve Jobs wanted it in market this quarter," Enderle said. "They just weren't able to get it done. I do expect we were going to see it in the first half of next year."

He said the biggest concern with an Apple tablet was probably the power-sapping Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) screen.

"So far there hasn't been a good e-book reader that uses an LCD display," he said. "You lose too much resolution. What makes an e-book reader great is that it reads just like paper and it has a long battery life.

"You typically get battery life measured in weeks if you turn off the wireless service on the [Kindle](#)," he said. "With an LCD screen, those damn things pull so much power it's hard to get a day."

Enderle said the Swiss Army knife approach also meant Apple was running "a fairly significant risk of repeating a consistent Microsoft mistake of trying to be everything for everyone and ending up being everything for nobody."

Jones said COOL-ER, which boasts the largest online bookstore in the world with 1.8 million titles, would welcome the competition from Apple.

"If it does have an e-reading application I think that would be fabulous and it would be yet more justification of the category being a growth area," he said.

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