With CES over, can tablet PCs live up to all the hype?

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Of all the hype generated by the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last week, few products generated more headlines and heat than tablet PCs.

Technology-industry executives showed off their newest table wares to varying degrees of excitement.

[Microsoft](#) Chief Executive [Steve Ballmer](#) got a ho-hum reaction as he showed off a new H-P Slate tablet, while executives from Dell Inc. gave a look at what they called a tablet-concept device that features a 5-inch screen.

Graphics chipmaker Nvidia Corp. boasted of the 500 engineers it took to design that company's new Tegra microchip, which Nvidia claims will revolutionize the capabilities of tablet devices.

Then there was Apple Inc. -- or rather, there wasn't Apple, which didn't attend CES but is expected to introduce a tablet Mac of its own, as soon as the end of the month.

Indeed, Apple's shadow led some analysts to assert that no one would even be talking about tablets were it not for the anticipation over what the Cupertino, Calif.-based company has planned.

The popularity and success of the [iPhone](#) in launching a new wave of [smart phones](#) is considered a prime example of why rivals need to get

into the tablet market before Apple comes out with a device that could have consumers thinking any other tablet is second-best. See story on how company is working on a tablet.

"You can talk about new tablets and applications, but it's still not enough to make anyone forget Apple," said David Daoud, analyst with IDC.

Another question facing any company looking to get into the tablet-PC market is whether the hype coming out of CES will amount to acceptance among consumers and translate into real sales. It's an issue that has dogged tablet PCs for years.

"Every couple of years it seems like everybody tried something new with tablets," said J.P. Gownder, vice president at Forrester Research. "So why is there so much interest now?"

While it is too early to tell how much traction tablets will gain among potential buyers, analysts say the state of technology is such that there might finally be the right mix of applications, hardware and mobility available to make tablet PCs more than just a niche device in an already-crowded market, with gadgets designed to deal with almost any computing a person may need.

Forrester's Gownder estimates that devices that could be considered tablet PCs date back to the Toshiba Dynapad, released in 1992. The latest iterations can be traced to late 2002, when Microsoft Corp. released the Windows XP Tablet PC Edition operating system. Bill Gates, then the chief executive, proclaimed: "We're just scratching the surface of what is possible" with tablet-size devices.

While tablet PCs have found some solid markets in medical, government and military applications, other devices (smartphones, digital-media players, netbooks and e-book readers, most recently) have taken hold

among mainstream consumers, effectively rendering the tablet into a novelty rather than a technological necessity.

That could be about to change, as a combination of better applications and mobility has made tablets more feasible, according to Stephen Baker of NPD Group.

"The older tablets were much more computer-centric," he said, referring to the emphasis on the hardware involved with the devices. "Now the emphasis is on access to content, the Internet and mobility. The infrastructure to make tablets popular just wasn't there in the past."

That infrastructure goes beyond just being able to write on the tablets' screens. The growth of wireless networking and Wi-Fi technology -- along with easy access to digital content from home and the office, as well as on the road -- are seen as reasons the likes of Dell and Hewlett-Packard Co. used CES as a platform for unveiling their latest tablet-PC efforts.

Still, not all are sold on the tablet and its potential to grab a major stake in the PC market. Part of analysts' skepticism is due to price points -- namely, whether such devices can push their way into a sector where notebooks are falling below $1,000 and even smaller netbooks can cost as low as $199.

Then there's the view that the only reason anyone is talking about tablets at all is because of Apple, and what its managers aren't saying about a company event that it won't confirm will be held in San Francisco at the end of the month.

Speculation has been rife for months that Apple will unveil a tablet version of the Mac sometime this year, in an effort to maintain its streak of successful new products that stretches back to the launch of the iPod

in late 2001.

"Whatever else is out there," said IDC's Daoud, "Apple is the one company most likely to create content and a platform with easy access to that content that could make this market appealing to the consumer."

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