

As iPad soars to success, other companies ready to test tablet waters

May 12 2010, By Brandon Bailey



The success of Apple's new iPad has prompted other tech companies to plunge into the market for tablet computers, with startups and major PC makers racing to introduce their own competing devices before the end of the year.

Verizon Wireless confirmed Tuesday that they have a tablet in the works. Speculation is swirling around the intentions of [Hewlett-Packard](#), the world's biggest PC maker and the company that some believe has the best shot at catching up with Apple's early iPad lead. Meanwhile, everyone from upstart Fusion Garage to established names such as [Dell](#) are jumping into the pool.

Experts say the iPad's early sales figures -- Apple said that it sold 1

million in four weeks -- are proof there's a strong market for such products. But it's unclear if other manufacturers can duplicate the iPad's appeal, or if Apple will dominate the market in the same way its iPods are much better known than competing music players.

"Anybody can make a tablet. I could go to Taiwan," hire a contract manufacturer, "and make 'Bob's tablet,' " said Bob O'Donnell, an industry analyst with International Data Corp. "The hard part is doing the software and getting the applications."

If any company has that ability, analysts say that HP, which sold nearly 60 million PCs last year, has the size and clout to line up deals with major content providers and mount a massive promotional campaign.

"They can do that. So you have to take HP seriously," said Jayson Noland, who follows the tech industry for Robert W. Baird & Co.

Earlier this year, even before the iPad officially went on sale, HP launched an Internet marketing campaign to promote a tablet it calls the Slate, which was designed to run on Microsoft software and which HP promised to begin selling this year. But plans to buy smart-phone maker Palm have raised questions about the Slate's future.

HP executives say they want to use Palm's rival software, webOS, to run a variety of mobile gadgets, including smart phones, netbooks and tablet computers. Citing an unnamed source, the industry blog TechCrunch reported April 30 that HP had canceled plans for the Microsoft-powered Slate.

Although the company declined to comment on that report, HP Executive Vice President Shane Robison told the San Jose Mercury News recently that HP may "at some point" build a Slate that runs on webOS.

The choice of software could be crucial. HP executives have previously said they believed Microsoft's newest operating system, Windows 7, offered touch capabilities and other attractive features for a tablet. But critics say Windows 7, which was designed for full-fledged computers, may be slower and consume more battery power than software created for smart phones such as Palm's webOS, Google's Android or Apple's iPhone OS software, which is used in the iPad.

Redesigning the Slate to run on Palm's software could delay HP's entry into the market by months or even a year, experts said.

Industry analyst Ezra Gottheil said he still expects HP to introduce a Windows-powered Slate this year and follow later with a version running Palm's webOS. Gottheil, who tracks the PC industry for Technology Business Research, said HP could aim each model at a different audience, such as consumer or business users.

"HP has no problem putting out multiple products," Gottheil said. "Some people have even criticized them for putting out too many products. I can't see them killing one just because another is coming up."

While HP executives have said little about their plans, the company has released a handful of Internet videos and blog entries about the Slate -- including brief promotional spots, backed by dramatic music, and short, low-key talks by HP executive Phil McKinney and Adobe Systems marketing manager Alan Tam.

Tam's pitch hammers home a likely HP selling point: Without mentioning Apple or the iPad by name, Tam proudly notes that HP's Slate will run Internet video, games and other online content created with Adobe's Flash and Air software, which Apple's device does not.

Apple has criticized Adobe's software as outdated, a charge that's

sparked a full-blown feud between the two companies. But Flash is still widely used by Internet content developers.

HP's videos also show a few other things the iPad lacks, including a front-facing camera for video chatting, and a slot for a memory card that can store extra photos and other content.

But there are some things the Slate won't have, O'Donnell noted: "Apple has an unbelievable head start, with 140,000 apps that you can run on the iPad. That's going to make it a lot harder for anybody else."

That hasn't stopped other companies from dipping their toes in the water. Fusion Garage is already selling its JooJoo tablet online. Dell has shown a prototype device with a 5-inch screen -- a bigger display than any smart phone, but smaller than the 9.7-inch screen on an [iPad](#) -- and is working on larger models.

Toshiba, Asus and other manufacturers are also expected to introduce tablets running on Google's Android operating system. The New York Times reported that even Google is exploring the idea of producing its own tablet. Google declined to comment.

Analysts say they don't expect tablets to replace other types of PCs, which have more features and capabilities. But PC makers clearly don't want to leave the tablet business to Apple.

"People are going to choose the technology that best fits their lifestyle," said Dell spokesman Matt Parretta. "In the end, we want to build what they want."

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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: As iPad soars to success, other companies ready to test tablet waters (2010, May 12)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2010-05-ipad-soars-success-companies-ready.html>

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