

Tablets crowd gadget show, chasing iPad's tail

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This combination of four photos shows four new tablet devices being presented this week at the 2011 Consumer Electronics Show in Las, Vegas. They are, clockwise from the upper left corner: the Motorola Xoom tablet, the Dell Streak 7 4G tablet, Panasonic's Viera Tablet, and the Samsung 7 Series sliding PC. (AP Photo/Julie Jacobson, (first and third photos), Isaac Brekken, (second and fourth).

(AP) -- Big tablets and small tablets, white ones and black ones. Cheap ones and expensive ones. Brand names famous and obscure at the starting line of a race where the iPad is already a speeding dot near the horizon.

It's impossible to walk the floor at this year's International [Consumer Electronics Show](#) without stumbling across a multitude of keyboard-less [touch-screen](#) computers expected to hit the market in the coming

months. With Apple estimated to have sold more than 13 million iPads last year alone, the competition is clearly for second place, but even that prize is worth pursuing.

Technology research firm Gartner Inc. expects that 55 million tablet computers will be shipped this year, most of them still iPads, but there will be room for rivals to vie for sales of the remaining 10 million to 15 million devices.

A bevy of consumer electronics makers, including major names such as Motorola Mobility Inc., Toshiba Corp. and Dell Inc., showed off their tablets in Las Vegas at CES, betting 2011 will be the year the gadgets finally take off.

Companies tried for years to popularize tablets, but the frenzy began only with the release of the [iPad](#) in April. Now companies whose names don't include the word "Apple" are doing everything they can to differentiate themselves from the tablet front-runner.

They're adding bells and whistles the iPad doesn't yet have - such as front and back cameras for video chatting and picture taking and the ability to work over next-generation 4G data networks - in hopes of taking on the iPad, or at least carving out a niche.

Motorola's Xoom sports a screen that measures 10.1 inches diagonally - slightly larger than the iPad's - and dual cameras for video chatting and taking high-definition videos.

It will also include the upcoming Honeycomb version of [Google](#) Inc.'s [Android](#) software. Honeycomb has been designed for the larger touch screens on tablets; current versions of Android, used in many of the tablets at CES, are meant more for the smaller touch screens on smart phones.

For example, Gmail on a Honeycomb tablet shows a list of e-mails in one column and the body of the one you're reading in a second column. On a current Android phone, you'd only see one column at a time.

Motorola, at least, is confident that its offering is more full-featured than the iPad.

"A lot of people have been waiting for the definitive tablet," said Paul Nicholson, Motorola's marketing director. "This is the definitive tablet."

The tablet, which will start selling in March for an as-yet-unknown price, will also work on Verizon Wireless' existing, 3G network at first and later be upgradeable to work on its faster 4G network.

Tablets that work with a wireless carrier's high-speed data network may be a key to success in the tablet space, said Ross Rubin, an analyst for NPD Group, a market research firm. While a version of the iPad can use AT&T Inc.'s 3G network, Apple has not yet announced a plan for it to use any of the new 4G networks.

"Today we see a lot of tablet usage in the home. Perhaps tying it to a faster network can ... really expand the on-the-go use case for these products," Rubin said.

No matter how well any of the new contenders are received, though, analysts expect Apple to dominate in the tablet market for at least two years. With Apple's habit of annually refreshing its products, chances are the iPad will gain new features early this year that could launch it even further ahead of the competition.

And the company has something no one else has been able to match: mind share. Forrester analyst Sarah Rotman Epps said consumers are buying the iPad because they see their friends and colleagues with it, not

because of its specific features.

"Just because Android tablets may have more features doesn't guarantee they will sell," Rotman Epps said.

But if the market opened up by Apple's other mobile triumph, the iPhone, is any indication, they will. Since its 2007 debut the iPhone has been immensely popular, but it also sparked increased consumer demand for other smart phones - eventually including those running Android.

For AsusTek Computer Inc., the most important focus right now appears to be hardware and software diversification. The Taiwanese computer maker unveiled a number of tablets at the show, including the Eee pad Transformer, which is a laptop that splits in two to function as a tablet, and the Eee Pad Slider, a tablet with a keyboard that slides out of its left side.

The Transformer is set to begin selling in April for \$399 to \$699, depending on its configuration. And the Slider is set to be sold starting in May for \$499 to \$799.

This puts its cheapest Transformer \$100 below the most inexpensive iPad, which sells for \$499 to \$829, depending on its configuration. Several other companies unveiled even cheaper tablets at CES, which could pique consumer interest, though lower prices could come with less-vivid screens and older software.

Richard Shim, a DisplaySearch analyst, said Asus' tactics point to a wider trend in tablets: The market is branching out extremely quickly in an effort to appeal to a wider range of consumers.

This extends to operating software, too: Some tablets shown ran Microsoft Corp.'s PC software, Windows 7. Research In Motion Ltd.,

the maker of BlackBerry phones, demonstrated its forthcoming PlayBook tablet, which is geared toward business users and runs new software built by QNX Software Systems, which RIM took over in 2010.

RIM plans to start selling a Wi-Fi version of the PlayBook early this year, and a version that operates on Sprint Nextel Corp.'s 4G network is due to arrive in the summer.

Android was clearly the software of choice at CES, though, and Honeycomb in particular. Rotman Epps sees this as the software for the first "real" Android tablet, despite the arrival of several non-Honeycomb Android tablets such as Samsung Electronics Co.'s Galaxy Tab last year. She thinks Honeycomb will help new tablets make their mark.

That's hard to judge now, however: Honeycomb hasn't been released yet. Many tablets at CES that will be released with that software were not showing off live versions of it at the show.

Several analysts said software - and the apps developed for it - are what will set winning tablets apart from the pack, but for now it's too soon to tell how compelling they will be.

"At the end of the day, that's what's going to sell the device," Shim said.

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