Review: iPad 2 is the best tablet on the market

March 18 2011, By Mark W. Smith

For Apple, the power is in the packaging. Unwrapping a brand-new Apple device is an experience that no other technology company has been able to match.

And while Apple has been chided for endlessly calling its devices "magical," there are few better words to describe this iPad 2, which is one-third thinner, 15 percent lighter and twice as fast as the original.

It is simply the best vessel on which to casually consume content - an experience that has dropped users more completely and comfortably into the Web than any other device in history.

It now boasts front- and rear-facing cameras, a dual-core 1 GHz processor and nine times the graphic performance.

The combination of those new features elevates the iPad 2 to a new level of usability - a mark yet unmatched by any other tablet maker.

The iPad 2 is now available in 18 flavors. Users can choose from sizes of 16, 32 and 64 GB, between WiFi-only and 3G-connected models using Verizon or AT&T, and also between black and white. Prices range from $499 to $829.

NEW CAMERAS ARE BEST FOR VIDEO

The iPad 2's front- and rear-facing cameras are clearly best suited for video capturing. The higher quality camera on the back takes 720p video, which Apple calls HD.

The quality of that video is commendable, although much less so in low-light conditions. Paired with Apple's new iMovie app ($4.99), the iPad 2 is an all-in-one video capturing and editing device.

The front-facing camera allows the iPad to join the suite of devices linked to FaceTime, Apple's video chatting software. Users can place video calls to other Apple devices, including the iPod Touch, iPhone and Mac computers.

The FaceTime experience is slick and the quality of the video calls over WiFi is excellent.

Both the front- and rear-facing cameras on the iPad 2 allow users to take still photographs, but the quality on both is less than poor. Apple isn't saying how many megapixels the cameras have, but several reports rate the rear camera at less than one megapixel.

Apple rates the iPad 2's battery life at 10 hours. In my tests, the iPad 2 exceeded that mark, reaching just shy of 11 hours while streaming video through Netflix over WiFi.

That's an important engineering accomplishment given the iPad 2's lighter weight and slimmer build.

Without constant use, expect the iPad 2 to last several days between charges, just like the original version.

APPS LEAD THE WAY

The iPad's best feature continues to be Apple's industry-leading app ecosystem. Apple boasts more than 65,000 apps built for the iPad's 9.7-inch touch screen display.

The biggest competitor here, Google's Android operating system, has fewer than 100 apps built for a tablet screen.

Apple also upgraded the iPad's Safari Web browser to make navigating around the Internet snappier. Pages load much faster than on the original iPad.

Users of the original iPad should see a similar bump in speed when they upgrade to the new software version made available last week.

The iPad 2 continues Apple's feud with the popular video format Flash. Don't expect a compromise here, even as it renders much of the Web's video unwatchable on the iPad.

The screen is also disappointingly the same as the model released last year. Apple's iPhone 4 has a stunning high-resolution display and many had hoped that screen would be included on the iPad 2.

NEW SMART COVER

One of the most exciting things about the iPad 2 is the innovative cover designed to protect it.

The Smart Cover was conceived alongside the iPad 2, Apple CEO Steve Jobs has said, and it shows. It works seamlessly with the new tablet, snapping on and snapping closed using magnets.

Opening the cover automatically turns the iPad 2 on, saving the few seconds that were required to wake up the previous version. It's like a refrigerator light - always on when you need it.

When the cover retracts and folds up, it serves as a stand in two positions - one perfect for typing and one for watching video.

The covers come in 10 versions - five vibrant colors in polyurethane ($39) and five more subdued tones in leather ($69).

The genius here is that the Smart Cover makes the iPad 2 feel like an entirely new device. And while it seems silly to suggest buying a $500-plus device to use a $40 case, it now feels impossible to use the iPad 2 any other way.

BETTER THAN THE COMPETITION

The iPad 2's only compelling competition, the Android-based Motorola Xoom, hit the market late last month without the features that were supposed to make it an iPad killer: support for Flash video, microSD cards and Verizon's next-generation 4G LTE wireless network. (All of those features are coming "soon," though, through software upgrades.)

And it dropped with a gulp-worthy price tag: $800.

Placed next to the iPad 2, the Xoom looks clunky and bloated.

It's not often that Apple gets mentioned as the company with a price advantage. But the California taste maker has managed to undercut its competition on price.

There is no better tablet on the market than the iPad 2.

APPLE IPAD 2: TECH SPECS

Size: 9.5x7.31x.34 inches

Weight: 1.33 pounds

Sizes: 16 GB, 32 GB and 64 GB

Price: $499 to $829

Network: Available on AT&T and Verizon wireless networks; WiFi-only model also available

Cameras: Rear camera for 720p video recording; front VGA camera for video chat. Both also shoot stills.

Screen: 9.7-inches, 1024x768 pixels at 132 pixels per inch

Battery life: Up to 10 hours

Where to buy: Apple, Verizon, AT&T, Target, Best Buy and Walmart stores. Also online at apple.com and att.com.