

Meet the Ultrabook: The next big thing in notebooks aims to compete with the iPad

April 12 2012, By Tricia Romano

At January's International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, there was a lot of chatter around Ultrabooks - thin, lightweight laptop notebooks designed to be more portable than the usual laptop and more powerful than that long-forgotten portal of computing, otherwise known as the netbook.

Ah, netbooks. Remember them? (We're guessing not.) They were itty-bitty PCs that were supposed to be the next big thing - until the [iPad](#) and the tablets came along and stole all their thunder. Part of the problem is that while netbooks are somewhat lightweight (around 2.5 to 3.5 pounds), they are a little chunky and don't come loaded with terribly fast [processors](#). That means waiting [eons](#) for the computer to react to simple tasks like switching between applications. And once the iPad was released, netbooks were doomed, as many of their targeted customers decided they didn't really need a dedicated keyboard.

But a large number of [consumers](#) do want a dedicated keyboard, and that's where the Ultrabook comes in. The Street reports that [Intel](#) expects Ultrabooks to be so popular that they will grow to be 40 percent of the consumer notebook market in 2012.

So what's different about the Ultrabook? It's more powerful than a [netbook](#) and nearly as fast as your regular full-featured laptop. Sure, the Ultrabook is lacking a mondo-sized [hard drive](#). But with cloud-based services like Dropbox now available, storage is less important, especially since the Ultrabook is supposed to be a travel-friendly, [portable](#)

[computer](#). Its [thinness](#) and lightness is made possible because of the lack of an [optical drive](#), so you can't watch DVDs. But because the world has turned to streaming videos online, optical drives are becoming increasingly less necessary anyway.

In a way, the first Ultrabook was actually the MacBook Air. But now that the Air's price has come down to earth (from \$2,000 to about \$999), it's clear that there's a big market for this price point and a slim design for both PCs and Mac.

NOTEWORTHY ULTRABOOKS

- HP Folio 13: Although Ultrabooks are lighter than their full-featured counterparts, the price tag doesn't always reflect that difference. The HP Folio 13 (about \$900 on sale, shopping.hp.com) is a bit chunkier than the competition, but it has a powerful Intel Core i5 CPU, which means it won't lag behind when you want to click on 20 applications at once. It's also got a sizable 128 GB solid-state drive, which means it'll turn on faster than computers with a regular hard drive, and you'll have plenty of room for all your music and movie files to boot.

- Acer Aspire S5: All the gadget geeks were agog over the Acer Aspire S5 at CES. The computer company does a decent job with netbooks (ranking among the top three companies in that arena). Untethered from the netbook's tiny size and equipped with a faster processor, the Acer S5 boasts a 13.3-inch screen - giving it a more comfortable viewing dimension - and weighs less than 3 pounds. But its bragging rights are in its physical profile. The company is claiming it will be the world's thinnest laptop at 15 mm. The Acer S5 is set to go on sale this spring, but the price tag isn't yet known. If you can't wait, the current Acer Ultrabook, the praised Acer S3 is available now in three models (\$799 to \$1,199, us-store.acer.com).

- **Lenovo:** Lenovo is not necessarily known for producing the most beautiful devices, but if you have a computer-programming friend, he or she probably owns a Lenovo ThinkPad or IdeaPad. Although we'll have to wait for Lenovo's fanciest offering yet - the IdeaPad Yoga - until later this year, the current Lenovo model, the IdeaPad U300s, is plenty nice, garnering four out of five stars from PCMag.com, Laptopmag.com and CNet.com. The U300s is only 18 mm thick, comes with a Core i5 or i7 processor (so fast!), a huge SSD hard drive (256 GB) and weighs about 3.5 pounds. Tech site Engadget's only gripe was that it was missing a memory card slot (which for us, personally, has never been a big necessity). Unfortunately, all that power and speed is going to cost you. But you can get the IdeaPad U300s from the Lenovo store (shop.lenovo.com) on sale for \$1,049.

- **Macbook Air:** Although Apple wouldn't deign to call the Air an Ultrabook, it's hard to deny that's what the MacBook Air ultimately is. Slender as a whippet, the Air gets mightier with each release. It's so good that Apple has apparently decided its entry-level laptop, the MacBook, is no longer necessary. You now have two portable choices: the Air or the much heavier and full-featured MacBook Pro. The smallest Air model is 11.6 inches, weighs 2.38 pounds and boasts a strong battery life lasting up to five hours of wireless Web surfing. The Air comes with all the usual features (Bluetooth, stereo speakers, mic), but it also has a Thunderbolt port (basically a souped-up USB connector) to make data transfer that much faster. It doesn't come cheap - the entry-level model costs \$999 at store.apple.com, putting the MacBook Air at the higher-end of the Ultrabook spectrum.

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