

Narrowing down the new choices in tablets

July 23 2012, By Ian Hamilton

After two years of minimal competition, the tablet wars are heating up. This year might finally be the time to jump in. But what to buy?

Heading into the back end of 2012, there are likely to be only four or five tablets worth consideration - Microsoft's Surface, Apple's iPad, Amazon.com's Kindle Fire and [Google](#)'s Nexus 7. There is much that is still unknown about these devices, but shoppers still have plenty to consider when deciding what to buy.

[TOUCH SCREEN](#) ONLY: Are a physical mouse and keyboard optional or necessary?

In 2010, Apple introduced the \$500 iPad, the first tablet with actual consumer appeal. Though other tablets came before it, iPad was built from the ground up for the touch screen. There was no true USB slot and thus no means of attaching accessories. There is zero support for a mouse, for instance, and no stylus.

Microsoft had no real response to this device, and the first batch of Android tablets couldn't draw interest while competing at the same price as iPad.

In 2011, it was Round 2. A thinner, more powerful iPad debuted against oncoming waves of Android tablets with still no response from Microsoft. But the \$200 Kindle Fire running Google's Android operating system was the first tablet to gain traction against the iPad. Meanwhile, a whole host of wireless keyboards debuted for the iPad.

In 2012, there was a third iPad, this one with a super-high-resolution screen. Google decided to emulate Amazon and attack the \$200 price point with the Nexus 7, a similar tablet to the Kindle Fire.

Now, Microsoft will debut its answer to the iPad - the Surface. In a break with the past, the company will build this tablet itself. The Surface will launch sometime later this year with Windows 8, a redesigned version of Windows.

Rather than focusing on touch input alone, like Apple, Microsoft has built Windows 8 for touch screens while also allowing it to be used with keyboards, mice, track pads and styluses. The Surface comes with expandable storage and a USB port to connect to accessories. The Surface's most defining feature is a magnetic protective cover that doubles as a full-sized keyboard and track pad.

Bottom line: Will this flexibility be important to users? Will this keyboard cover work well? Will the multiple input methods on Windows 8 cause applications to function strangely?

LARGE OR SMALL: Tablet options in 2012 are shaping up to fall into two distinct categories - large and small. You could also think of the difference as cheap and expensive.

The large tablets start with iPad, at 9.7 inches, fighting it out with Microsoft's Surface, at 10.6 inches. These tablets more or less start between \$400 and \$600 and work their way up in price for additional storage.

The small category will be occupied by the Nexus 7 and the Kindle Fire, which have 7-inch screens. Though the Nexus 7 ships this month, Amazon's [Kindle Fire](#) is due for an upgrade in the next few months. As it stands, the [Nexus](#) 7 features newer, better hardware, has the absolute

latest Android software from Google, and weighs less. The smaller format makes these tablets far more portable - they might be able to fit in a pocket - while simultaneously allowing manufacturers to cut costs significantly.

Apple has been rumored to be considering a 7.85-inch iPad with a screen resolution the same as the original iPad for release later this year. Such a device, if actually released, could run every iPad app while giving Apple a device that could compete for price and portability in the 7-inch category.

Bottom line: Are you looking for something with portability closer to that of a phone or a big screen experience closer to that of a laptop?

APP QUALITY TRUMPS ALMOST EVERYTHING: Inexpensive apps are easy to add to a device and can do just about anything. Simply put, apps are the entire tablet experience, and how well they are made determines the quality of the experience overall.

Apple has done well to ensure top-notch quality of apps in its store. For now, there's only one iPad size, and that means thousands of apps work perfectly for it. Meanwhile Android gadgets come in all sizes, forcing developers to spend extra resources ensuring apps work on lots of different gadgets.

The result is that major developers today are building their apps for both Apple's gadgets and Android, usually for Apple first and then for the most popular and powerful Android-based gadgets soon after.

The big question: What will Microsoft's entry with the Surface tablet do to the development of apps for competing platforms? Microsoft has years of catching up to do, and Windows 8 needs high-quality apps to compete. It's not clear whether developers building for Windows 8

tablets will draw attention away from Android app development or [iPad](#) app development or both.

Bottom line: If you're on the edge trying to decide between two different [tablets](#), you'll want to find your way into a store and try out apps on the devices before buying.

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