

A smaller iPad could push 'tweener' tablets into mainstream

October 19 2012, by Troy Wolverton

Just two years ago, Apple's late co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs mocked small-screened tablets as "tweeners" that were too little to compete with the larger iPad but too big to compete with smartphones.

But after the success that Amazon and [Google](#) have had with small-screen tablets, Apple appears poised to introduce a "tweener" of its own in the form of a pint-size iPad. The [iPhone](#)-maker has scheduled a media event next week at which it is widely expected to unveil the iPad mini. And experts say Apple's new gadget could push small tablets into the mainstream.

Jobs may have been right that small tablets are more difficult to use than the iPad, but they have two big advantages: they're cheaper and more portable. And because of those advantages, they're bound to find a wide audience, said Mark Rolston, chief creative officer of Frog, a San Francisco industrial design company.

The screen size of small tablets is "not ideal, but it's good enough," Rolston said. "There are lots of people that just want to have this choice."

Apple has sold some 84 million iPads since the product's launch in 2010. In the second quarter of this year, they accounted for some 68 percent of all tablets sold worldwide, according to market research firm IDC. That makes the iPad the benchmark for what a tablet should be: a device with a 10-inch screen and a starting price of \$500.

But analysts and industry experts have long believed there's room in the market for a computing device that fits in between the iPad and smartphones. The iPad's price puts it out of the range of many consumers, and its bulky size makes it impossible to stow in a pocket and uncomfortable to hold in the hand for long periods when reading a book or watching a movie.

And e-[book readers](#) such as Amazon's Kindle, which typically come with 6-inch screens, have shown there's demand for "tweener" devices.

"There's only so many people who will spend \$500 and above" for a tablet, said Stephen Baker, an analyst with NPD Group, a market research firm. Smaller tablets, he said, are "useful to a much bigger audience."

Large-screen tablets, including the iPad and upcoming rivals that will run Windows, have been touted as PC replacements for business or creative tasks, such as writing documents, editing photos or entering data. By contrast, analysts see the smaller-screen tablets as geared more for watching movies, reading books or surfing the Web.

"These tablets are what you consume media on," said Tom Mainelli, an analyst with IDC.

Within a year of the iPad's launch, Research in Motion, Samsung and other manufacturers introduced tablets with 7-inch screens that largely flopped. But analysts say that was less because of their small screen size than their high prices, which were in the same neighborhood as the iPad's.

"The content and the applications weren't there and the price wasn't right," said Carolina Milanesi, an analyst with market research firm Gartner.

The iPad's smaller rivals finally gained traction last year, when Amazon introduced the Kindle Fire, which has a 7-inch screen. The device, which has direct links to Amazon's digital music, movie and book stores, carried a compelling \$200 price. Amazon shipped 4.7 million of them, according to IDC, instantly jumping into second place in the tablet market behind Apple.

Thanks in large part to Amazon's success, smaller tablets made up 23 percent of all tablet shipments in the fourth quarter last year, up from close to 0 percent earlier in the year.

"The 7-inch category started to take off at the end of last year," said IDC's Mainelli. Although sales slowed in the first quarter of this year, they are "starting to pick up steam" again, he said.

It remains unclear whether a boom in sales of small-screen tablets would come at the expense of other devices, including larger tablets. For now, some analysts expect healthy sales growth for both small and large [tablets](#).

Among those who bought a Kindle Fire is Charles Wehrenberg of San Francisco, who runs his own e-book publishing company. Although he also has a Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1, which has an [iPad](#)-size screen, he likes the Fire's portability.

"The nice thing about a 7-inch screen is it's actually a pocketable device," said Wehrenberg, 68. "If I'm going to sit down and read something ... I would use the 7-inch Fire."

Berkeley, Calif., resident John Khoo, 30, bought another 7-inch device, Google's Nexus 7, in the summer. Khoo, who works for Electronic Arts, likes both its portability and its \$200 price. He uses it instead of his laptop to surf the Web and recently took it on a trip to Ireland in place of

his computer.

"It's a lot easier to sit down on the couch and have this than to have the laptop on my lap," he said.

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