

Review: Gift guide to full-size tablets

November 23 2012, by Peter Svensson



This Monday, June 18, 2012, file photo, shows a profile view of the new Microsoft Surface, a tablet computer in Los Angeles. Tablets are at the top of many wish lists this holiday season. The choice used to be pretty limited, with the iPad dominating over the latecomers. But this year, the field is more even, as tablets from Apple's competitors have matured. In addition, Google and Microsoft have dived in with their own tablets, providing more choice. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

Tablets are at the top of many wish lists this holiday season. But what to get? The choice used to be pretty limited, with the iPad dominating the latecomers. But this year, the field is more even, as tablets from Apple's competitors have matured. In addition, Google and Microsoft are diving in with their own tablets, providing more choice.

The first step in the buying process is to decide on the size of the tablet. They fall into two rough categories: the full-sized tablet, pioneered by

the iPad, and the half-size tablet, epitomized by the Kindle Fire.

Full-sized tablets, which generally have screens measuring about 10 inches on the diagonal, are better for surfing websites designed for PCs, and far better when it comes to displaying magazines and documents. Overall, they go further toward replacing a [laptop](#). They cost \$400 and up.

Half-sized tablets, which have screens measuring roughly 7 inches on the diagonal, are cheaper and lighter, but just as good as full-sized tablets for e-book reading. It's an excellent first computing device for a kid, or a gentle nudge into the digital world for an older adult with little computing experience. This year's crop costs \$199 and up, but last year's models are available for less.

If you've settled on a large tablet, here are some top choices.

- [Apple iPad](#), fourth generation (starts at \$499)

Apple usually updates the iPad once a year, so it was a surprise when it dropped a new model in October, with a faster processor and the new "Lightning" connection and charging port, replacing the wide port inherited from the iPod. Like the third-generation iPad launched in March it has an ultra-high-resolution "Retina" screen. The model's resolution of 2,048 by 1,536 pixels is only surpassed by the Google [Nexus 10](#).

That means the current iPad is two generations ahead of the iPad 2 that was on sale last [holiday season](#). It packs enough improvements to make the upgrade worth it. The iPad 2 is still on sale for \$100 less, but it's not a very good value for the money: if \$400 is all you can spend, there are better tablets out there than the iPad 2.

While other tablets are starting to approach it in terms of hardware, the iPad still enjoys the best support by far from third parties, both in terms of quality applications and accessories like cases.

One caveat: the base model of the iPad has only 16 gigabytes of storage, which fills up fast these days. The thoughtful giver goes for at least a 32-gigabyte model, for \$100 more.

Other than that, there are few downsides to the iPad: no one will frown when opening this package.

- Barnes & Noble Nook HD+ (starts at \$269)

For a book store, Barnes & Noble makes some amazing tablets. The HD+ is its first model that approaches the iPad in size, with a screen that's 9 inches on the diagonal. That makes it slightly smaller than the iPad, and the resolution is lower as well, but still very respectable. At 1,920 by 1,280 pixels, it can show more detail than a living-room HDTV.

The Nook is family-friendly too. You can create user accounts and restrict them from certain content, so there's less risk that your kids will stumble on your copy of "Fifty Shades of Grey."

Like the basic iPad, the basic Nook HD+ comes with just 16 gigabytes of storage memory, but it can be expanded with a microSD memory card. That means another 32 gigabytes will cost you just \$25 - a good deal.

But the Nook is the least versatile tablet in our roundup. The number of apps available is small, and it's focused on Barnes & Noble content like e-books, magazines and movies. It doesn't have any cameras, while the competitors have two each. It's best for someone who's likely to stick to

media consumption, and doesn't need the latest apps and games.

- Samsung Galaxy Note 10.1 (starts at \$499)

If the Nook is for the avid reader or movie watcher, the Galaxy Note 10.1 is for the creative type. It's the only tablet in our roundup that comes with a "pen" that can be used to write and draw on the screen. In our test, this worked well, though the number of apps that take advantage of the pen is still small. (Other tablets, like the iPad, only respond to finger-like objects, so third-party styluses for them are of necessity thick and clumsy.)

The Note 10.1 runs Google's Android software, giving it access to a wide array of apps originally written for smartphones. The selection is not on par with the iPad's but better than other alternatives.

The Note's screen falls into the low-resolution category, sporting 1,280 by 800 pixels. That's a third of what the iPad musters.

Like the Nook, the Note 10.1's storage memory can be expanded with cards.

The Note's appeal is somewhat niche, but it could be just the thing for the budding or established artist.

- Microsoft Surface (starts at \$499)

Microsoft's first tablet seems at first like a throwback to the first iPad. It's thick, heavy and rugged. But it's really doesn't have much in common with the first iPad or any Apple- or Google-powered tablet. It runs Windows RT, a version of Windows 8 adapted for tablets. It comes with a version of Microsoft's Office suite and the ability to connect to wireless printers and some other peripherals, like USB drives. The

covers for it have functional keyboard printed on the inside.

The screen resolution is 1,366 by 768 pixels, placing it in the low-resolution category.

The Surface screams "work, work, work." It's the tablet for those who are wedded to Word and want to take their writing on the go.

One thing to note about the Surface: the basic model starts out with "32 gigabytes" of memory, but of that, only 16 gigabytes are available to the user. It accepts memory cards of up to 64 gigabytes, however, so expanding the memory is cheap.

Note that even though it runs Windows, the Surface doesn't run standard Windows applications. It will run only programs specifically adapted for Windows RT. The selection is, for now, quite limited.

- Asus Vivo Tab RT (starts at \$599 with a dock)

Asus has a quality line of Android tablets they call "Transformer" because they dock into a keyboard with an extra battery. The combination folds up just like a small laptop and has excellent battery life. The Vivo Tab RT essentially takes a Transformer and stuffs it with Windows RT instead of Android.

The tablet part is smaller and thinner than the Surface. Together with the keyboard, it makes for a familiar little setup: a tiny laptop running Windows. Like the Surface, it has a memory card slot and a USB port. The screen resolution is the same.

The Vivo Tab is a good tool for those who want to get some work done on the commute or plane, or those who can't decide if they want a laptop or a tablet.

- Google Nexus 10 (starts at \$399)

This is Google's first full-size tablet and the only tablet from any manufacturer that beats the screen resolution of the iPad. It boasts 2,560 by 1,600 pixels, a third more than the fourth-generation iPad.

It's also the only tablet in this roundup that has speakers on either side of the screen when it's held horizontally, making for good stereo reproduction when you're watching movies. It has a grippy, rubberized back and widely rounded corners. There's no memory card slot or an option for a cellular modem.

The array of third-party software is wide, just as it is for the Note 10.1. Most people don't associate Google with online books, music or movies, so it may feel odd that the Nexus steers buyers to Google's Play store. Of course, given the open nature of [Google's](#) Android operating system, there are apps available for other entertainment stores, including Amazon's, and for streaming services like Netflix.

The Nexus 10 is a snappy performer, and among the iPad's competitors, it comes the closest to matching the versatility of Apple products.

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