

Tips for holiday tablet shoppers

November 29 2012, by Troy Wolverton



One item sure to be on many holiday shopping lists this year is a tablet. But which one to choose?

Consumers will see more tablets on the market than ever - a bewildering array of shapes, sizes, operating systems and manufacturers. All that choice is likely to confuse many consumers, and no doubt encourage some to go with what has been the default option over the last two years: Apple's iPad.

That would be a good choice for many [consumers](#), but the iPad is not the best tablet for everybody. To help you decide what's the best tablet for you or for someone on your shopping list, here are some things to consider.

PRICE: You can spend anywhere from less than \$100 to nearly a \$1,000 for a tablet. In general, you'll pay more for top brands and larger screen sizes.

Name-brand 7-inch tablets start at around \$200 and larger models, such as Barnes & Noble's 9-inch Nook HD+, at about \$270. The iPad costs more than most of its Android competitors, with the iPad Mini starting at \$330 and the full-sized iPad at \$500.

Windows-based models vary widely in price, but those running Windows 8 are generally more expensive than those running Windows RT. Microsoft's Surface tablets are about in line with the iPad's pricing.

SCREEN SIZE: Most tablets have screens that fall into one of two size ranges - 7 to 8 inches and 9 to 10 inches.

Smaller tablets, which include Amazon's Kindle Fire HD and Apple's iPad Mini, are less expensive, lighter and often thinner than the larger ones. They're more portable than the larger tablets, easily fitting in many purses, and make ideal reading devices.

Larger tablets, which include Apple's full-size iPad, Microsoft's Surface and Samsung's Galaxy Tab 2 (10.1), are pricier and less portable. But their larger screens make for a more satisfying movie-watching experience. And their screens are much better for tasks such as writing documents or editing pictures.

OPERATING SYSTEM: Most tablets run one of three [operating systems](#): Apple's iOS, Google's Android or Microsoft's Windows.

Apple's iOS, which underlies the iPad, has a well-earned reputation for being easy to learn and use. Despite much improvement, Android is still more complicated and less intuitive, and comes in various versions with

different features.

The new Metro interface in Windows was designed with touch-screen devices like tablets in mind, but the software relies on the old desktop interface, which can be clumsy and difficult to use on a tablet. And new Windows tablets come in two confusing flavors - those that run Windows RT, which includes Microsoft's Office suite, but can't run older Windows programs, and those that run Windows 8, which lacks Office, but supports older applications.

Apple's iOS has its own shortcomings, notably that it lacks some features that you'll find in its competitors. Unlike the iPad, Android tablets support widgets, small programs that run on your home screen and offer updated information at a glance. Windows tablets can display more than one application at a time. Google's Nexus tablets, Barnes & Noble's Nook and tablets running both versions of Windows, can support multiple user accounts, allowing owners to share tablets with friends or family members without giving them access to their email or personal information. And users can also connect a mouse and trackpads to Android and Windows tablets, which can make them easier to use for writing and editing documents than the iPad, which doesn't support them.

APPS: According to Apple, users will find some 275,000 apps in its store that have been customized for its tablets. That's far more than you'll find for either Android or Windows devices.

Android tablets can make up some of the difference with their support for apps written for Android smartphones. But those apps often look distorted on some tablets' larger displays. And they typically display less information than you'd see on a tablet-customized app, requiring you to spend more time going back and forth between different screens.

But both Android and Windows devices can tout apps that the iPad lacks. Windows has Office, while Google's Nexus devices include Google Now, an "intelligent agent" that's similar but more capable than Apple's Siri.

CONTENT: If you've purchased a digital song, movie or TV show, there's a good chance you bought it from the iTunes store and it's stored in the iTunes software on your computer. Apple's iPads are the only tablets that can sync directly with iTunes and download movies or songs from the service.

Google, Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Microsoft offer their own competing stores, but they're not as popular as iTunes and in some cases don't offer the same selection. What's more, Amazon and Barnes & Noble both offer apps for the [iPad](#) that allow users to access books and - in Amazon's case - movies they've purchased from those stores.

CONNECTIVITY: All [tablets](#) include a Wi-Fi radio to connect to the Internet via the hotspot in your home or the one at the local coffee shop. But some models also include a cellular radio that allows them to connect to the wireless companies' 3G and 4G networks. Such models are able to connect to the Internet from many more places.

But that option can be an expensive add-on. [Apple](#) charges \$130 more for iPads that include a cellular radio, while Google charges \$50 extra for the cellular-enabled Nexus 7. And to use those devices on the wireless networks, users have to sign up for a data plan that can cost \$15 a month or more.

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Citation: Tips for holiday tablet shoppers (2012, November 29) retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2012-11-holiday-tablet-shoppers.html>

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