

Apple iPad Air debut meets with yawns from buyers

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Apple released the faster, thinnest and lightest version of its iPad on Friday, but the usual long lines and hoopla for the launch of a new device from the consumer-tech giant were absent in the early, post-Halloween morning light.

The scene outside stores in Palo Alto, Calif., was muted, with only a sprinkling of customers awaiting the iPad Air release. About two dozen customers were lined up outside the store on University Avenue just a

half-hour before doors opened, a little more than half the crowd that showed up for the iPad Mini launch last year, and fewer than 20 braved the chilly morning temperatures at Stanford Shopping Center. In San Jose, Calif., no line had formed about 2 hours before the Apple store at Oakridge Mall threw open its doors, with about 15 people eventually lining up by 8 a.m., including some couples.

"I'm the dork who showed up early," said Kevin Anderson, who arrived at 6 a.m. at the Stanford store to claim first place in line. "I couldn't wait."

Anderson, an engineer for Tesla, had been iPad-less for a couple weeks after selling his second-generation device on eBay.com for a respectable \$310. He has been using mostly his iPhone for Internet access.

"We only have one computer at home, and it's always busy Pinterest-ing by my wife," Anderson said, referencing the social media-sharing platform Pinterest. "It's driving me nuts."

Charles Zhou, a mobile application developer from Sunnyvale, Calif., arrived shortly before the store opened at 8 a.m. - and was still among the first customers to enter the store.

Like Anderson, Zhou said he had been without an iPad since selling his second-generation device last week on eBay for \$280. He bought one of Google's Nexus tablets to try to hold him over.

"I said, 'Let's see if this is enough,' " Zhou said. "And immediately I was like, 'I miss iPad.' "

Shoppers were in and out of the Stanford store in about five minutes, a few offering only a quick cheer after making their purchase - marking a stark contrast to the pomp and circumstance of Apple's iPhone launch

last month. Other customers popped in for a smartphone repair or to browse, seemingly unaware of the release event.

One customer ran up to the store about a half-hour after it opened and asked an Apple employee: "Hey, where are all the people?"

The lines may have been even shorter if Apple had allowed customers to pre-order the devices, as it did with last month's iPhone launch and previous iPad debuts. Software engineer Erasmo Acosta drove to Stanford from Fremont, Calif., early Friday to nab an iPad Air, but said he doesn't normally go to launch events and doesn't particularly like them.

"But since (Apple) eliminated the presale, we're out here in the cold," he said. "I don't enjoy it."

Still, Acosta was excited to replace his year-old, fourth-generation iPad for the new iPad Air. "It's faster, better, and the whole experience is better," he said.

In-store sales of the iPad Air began in Australia and are headed to more than 40 other countries, marking the biggest launch yet for one of Apple's tablets. Lines were long at some stores across the globe, with reports of many hours-long waits in some countries. The Apple store in Hong Kong sold out online before the device went on sale in stores, according to news reports. But U.S. launches were much more subdued from New York to Palo Alto.

The iPad Air is Apple's fifth version of a full-sized tablet since the device was introduced in 2010. The 9.7-inch iPad Air is another Apple design marvel, weighing in at just 1 pound, the lightest full-sized tablet in the world, according to the company. Other full-sized iPads weigh 1.4 pounds. Apple unveiled the new product at an event last week in San

Francisco, hoping to wow shoppers just as the holiday season kicks into gear.

Apple is also preparing to release an upgraded version of the iPad Mini - the company's answer to a device midway between a smartphone and tablet computer - sometime this month, and supply is expected to be short, such as it was with the Mini's debut last year. The latest iteration of the 7.9-inch tablet adds the adding high-definition "retina" display available on full-sized tablets and some Mac products.

Friday's tablet release is the second product launch of the fall for Apple, and rounds out a busy season. The device maker released two iPhones last month: The iPhone 5S, the new flagship smartphone offered in metallic colors including a gold version that Apple fans have lusted after; and the iPhone 5C, the company's answer to a less-expensive smartphone, which lacks some of the 5S processing power and starts at \$99. Apple also rolled out the latest iOS update last month, and has since been scrambling to fix bugs and security glitches in the operating system.

Apple CEO Tim Cook said at last week's San Francisco event that iPad sales had surpassed 170 million since 2010. But since its release, new and cheaper tablet makers have stolen some of Apple's thunder, with competitors such as Korea's Samsung Electronics Co. eating away at Apple's market share.

According to a report released this month from research firm IDC, Apple held less than 30 percent of the tablet market in the third quarter this year, compared to more than 40 percent a year ago. Meanwhile, Samsung took more than 20 percent of the market during the third quarter, a jump from about 12 percent last year. Top tablet vendors Asus, Lenovo and Acer posted year-over-year growth that far exceeded Apple's, according to the report. But IDC also acknowledged that Apple had no new iPad product launches in the second or third quarter to drive

sales.

Apple's slippage has been blamed in part on its high prices, and the new models, despite their light-as-air feel and pocket-size dimensions, come with the usual hefty Apple price tags. The iPad Air has a starting price of \$499, and ships with same powerful 64-bit A7X processor that debuted last month in the new iPhone 5S. The Mini got a price bump, up \$70 to \$399.

But the Mini may help Apple turn around its slumping tablet numbers. According to research firm NPD Group, the iPad Mini is expected to account for half of all Apple's total iPad shipments this year - about 50 million. Despite getting a lukewarm reception from Apple fans during its launch last year, has started to overtake sales of its larger tablet cousins. The latest iteration adds the high-definition retina display available on full-sized tablets and some Mac products.

Apple, still floating on record-breaking sales from the iPhone launch last month, is hoping for a strong opening weekend and high demand through Christmastime amid concerns of slower holiday sales growth this year. But whether it does indeed turn out to be an iPad Christmas remains to be seen. Analysts with the National Retail Federation said this week they expect tablet sales to makes gains this holiday season, although many shoppers will be looking for those with prices closer to Amazon's \$229 Kindle Fire HDX 7-inch tablet.

"We expect to see a lot of tablet-type purchases," said Pam Goodfellow, consumer insights director for NRF partner Prosper Insights & Analytics, "but tablets that are a couple hundred dollars apiece."

According to research from the Consumer Electronics Association, overall tech spending will rise about 2.6 percent this year, and about 26 percent of consumers surveyed said they plan to buy a [tablet](#) as a gift this

year, roughly the same as last year. But according to the NRF, many shoppers will be as cost-conscious, with about 14 percent planning to make their own gifts and 29 percent buying "more practical" items such as winter coats.

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