

# Review: Amazon Fire tablets can compete with iPads, but that may not matter

November 12 2014, by Troy Wolverton, San Jose Mercury News

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Amazon has garnered far less success than it deserves in consumer electronics, and its latest line of tablets may well continue that trend despite comparing favorably with Apple's latest iPad.

The e-commerce giant recently updated its tablet lineup. Like previous versions, the new Fire devices - Amazon has removed the "Kindle" from their name - are well built, generally well-priced and have some innovative features. They also will likely be hard-pressed to make a dent in the tablet market.

That's because Amazon's new devices arrive as the [tablet market](#) is in the middle of a transition period. Sales growth has slowed considerably, demand has shifted to much lower-cost devices, and Amazon hasn't established itself as a top-tier brand for which consumers will pay a premium.

Not that the company hasn't tried. Amazon's flagship tablet, the recently updated Fire HDX 8.9, is 14 percent lighter than Apple's svelte new iPad Air 2. Although its screen is slightly smaller, it has a higher resolution. And Amazon's device promises two hours more battery life than Apple's gadget.

It also has features that the iPad lacks, including support for multiple user logins and the ability to easily limit what programs and information kids can access. It comes with Amazon's cool Mayday feature that connects users to live technical support on their device. And it also has Firefly, a clever app Amazon introduced this summer with its Fire phone that can identify songs, TV shows, phone numbers, Web addresses and physical products and can be used to comparison shop or quickly pull up a Web page.

Amazon introduced the HDX 8.9 last year. This year's model has a faster processor and promises speedier graphics performance. It also can access the latest version of Wi-Fi, which in some situations should allow Web pages to download much quicker.

In the processor test I ran, the new Fire wasn't as speedy as the latest iPad, but you likely won't notice the difference. The device was plenty zippy.

In addition to the HDX 8.9, Amazon also rolled out less expensive [tablets](#), most notably some kids devices, including a 6-inch model that starts at \$150.

Unlike Amazon's regular tablets, the kids models come with a foamlike protective case that covers their back and sides. Amazon is also promising to replace the devices for free if they break for any reason in the first two years. And Amazon is including with them a one-year subscription to FreeTime unlimited, its collection of kid-oriented books, movies, TV shows, apps and games.

For adults, the six-inch screen is likely too small; in particular, the text used to label icons and show the [device](#)'s status can be tough to read. It also seems slow compared with other devices, as there's a noticeable lag in loading apps.

The new devices share some of the same problems as their predecessors. They are built on a highly customized version of Android, Fire OS, that Amazon has designed to channel users to its own services and products. Other apps and services can be harder to access. Worse, Amazon's tablets don't have access to Google's Play store with its wide variety of apps. Instead, users are limited to Amazon's own app store, which lacks popular programs from Google and other companies.

But in terms of how they'll fare in the market, Amazon's new tablets may have bigger problems than that.

Amazon quickly came to dominate the e-reader business with its Kindle devices. And it made a big splash when it released its first Kindle Fire tablet three years ago.

But the company's [consumer electronics](#) business has struggled, even as Amazon has broadened its lineup. Its tablet sales fell in the first half of this year from the same period a year earlier, according to IDC. And the company announced that its new Fire smartphones had sold so poorly since hitting the market in July that it had to take a \$170 million charge on unsold devices.

The first Kindle Fire tablet was a hit in large part because it was inexpensive, appealing to consumers who wanted a tablet but couldn't afford to spend \$500 for an iPad. But that strategy hasn't worked as well since, analysts say, in large part because other companies have undercut Amazon on price. While the new Fire HDX 8.9 starts at \$380, and you can find Android tablets with similarly sized screens for as little as \$70.

"They were trying to sell what they thought was an entry-level solution at what turned out to be a premium-level price point," said Stephen Baker, a consumer technology analyst at market research firm NPD Group.

Some consumers have been willing to pay extra, just not for what Amazon's offering, analysts note. Indeed, consumers seem to be rejecting the Amazon-centric approach of the Fire tablets and phones in favor of general-purpose devices, analysts say.

Consumers "prefer a pure Android platform rather than something else," said Jean Philippe Bouchard, an analyst at tech research firm IDC.

That's unfortunate for Amazon. Because the company's tablets - particularly its new HDX 8.9 - are good enough to deserve more attention from consumers.

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Troy's Rating: Eight out of 10.

What: Amazon Kindle Fire HDX 8.9 tablets

Likes: Lightweight design; super-sharp display; Mayday feature that connects to live technical support; Firefly app that quickly identifies music, TV shows and real-world objects; speedy processor; reasonable price.

Dislikes: Lacks access to Google apps and Play store; Amazon's store offers less selection than Google's or Apple's; tie to Amazon's apps and services makes it much easier to access them than those from third parties.

Specs: 2.5 GHz quad-core processor; 8.9-inch, 2560 x 1600 pixel screen; high-definition front and 8-megapixel back cameras.

Price: WiFi-only models start at \$380 for 16-gigabyte version. Models with Wi-Fi and LTE start at \$530 for 32-gigabyte models.

Web: [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

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