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TECHNOLOGY

The iPad Wins Over an Apple Skeptic

Column: Tricks & Tips

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[If you've already read the part of this column that appeared in our June print issue, you can [click here to jump](#) to the bonus online content.]

Over the past few months, many in the technology-focused media have been talking about the iPad. No, actually, they've been star-crossed, head-over-heels in love with it ... or totally opposed to it. The largest tech media outlets even received demo units months in advance of the March debut. There were no freebies for us, however. If we wanted one, we'd just have to wait in line like everybody else. And I'm not sure that Apple would have wanted to send a unit to me for review, anyway, considering that over the past several years, I've written skeptical and even directly negative things about the iPod, the iPhone, Mac computers and Apple in general.

Apple fans, especially iPhone users, have told me time and again that I just don't get it. Of course, that helps me prove my point, since it emphasizes that the selection between computing models is subjective. So when the costs for one can be double that of the other ... well, the creative and subjective rarely beats the utilitarian. That's why the PC computer is ubiquitous, especially in most business environments. It is cheaper and ... well, almost as good.

Sure, Macs are Better, But Here's Why I'm a PC

Yes, the PC is the Volkswagen Beetle of yesteryear, which, as my father often told me, was inexpensive but prone to breaking down. Fortunately, it was also cheap to work on, he added, since most people who owned a Bug did so because they couldn't afford a more expensive car or, for that matter, a mechanic. So they learned how to fix their own cars. While that isn't flattery to PCs, it is at the heart of the matter: PCs are the cheap and replaceable computing standard in our "throwaway and replace" society.

The Apple brand, however, has turned into the Lexus of computers, with the luxury of the supposed ease-of-use of Macs at its peak for people who have no desire to learn how to be a technical mechanic. The luxury is there for those who are willing to pay for it, but that ease of use is at a premium that most individuals are leery to invest in. And businesses seem even less likely to invest in the pricier Mac brand in a tough economy.

So at least as far as the Mac and PC argument goes, I'm a PC because:

- a) I've always used a PC;
- b) I've learned how to be an optimal and secure PC user;
- c) I've been, at times, a PC mechanic, even building whole PCs from the box and motherboard up;
- d) I don't want to spend twice as much on a computer.

I think this is the "good enough," utilitarian view, and I'm fairly sure that most business owners, even non-techie ones, would agree. As far as the iPod and iPhone go, I stand by my rationale that a non-iPod MP3 device can offer the same functions and features at half the cost; and that the iPhone still isn't the best smartphone for business, primarily because I think BlackBerry and Windows Mobile phones offer better Outlook integration for email and calendaring, and are better for high-volume typing tasks.

The iPad is Different

Something about the iPad intrigued me, though. While I look skeptically on the iPhone for business use, I do have a lot of respect for everything else it does. There's no doubt that there are far more apps available for it than other phones, particularly in terms of entertainment and social communication features. In other words, there are a lot of games and web-based tools, ebook functionality, easier photo and music gadgets, plus great integration with social media like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

I received my iPad in late April, and guess what? Having started this column emphasizing my anti-Apple techie credibility, I will admit this: I love the iPad. No, I'm not going to go hop on the Apple bandwagon: I'll stick with my PC and my MP3 player, at least for now. But I am an iPad fan, and here's why:

Light Mobile Utility

The iPad isn't going to replace notebooks and laptops for mobile professionals who need real computer programs, spreadsheet capabilities or strong word processing functions. I'm sure the iPad will get better at these things in the future, but at least in the near-term, it isn't a "computer" in the traditional sense of the word. The iPad is, instead, a mobile information and entertainment platform that bridges the space between full-work and full-play. What do I mean by that?

Shortly after receiving my iPad, I attended the Sage Insights Conference in Denver. While I'd had the chance to experiment with the device for a few weeks prior, the conference was my first opportunity to use it in a work setting. My plan was to use the iPad as my conference sidekick, but also to bring along my regular laptop for the more intensive writing projects. Instead, I didn't even bring a laptop. And over the course of the four-day conference, the iPad was able to handle virtually all of my needs.

(Bonus Online Content Starts Here!)

There are two general versions of the device on the market, both have wireless capabilities, but one has 3G (like mobile smartphones); each is then also offered with different hard drive capacities. I have the model with wireless and no 3G, and here's the primary reason why I think it's sufficient for most users: I don't plan on walking much while using it (that could be dangerous around cars, although I did a little bit of walk/iPadding around Denver's 16th Street Mall). I also don't expect to head out to the lake with it or take it camping.

My point is that, most of the time, if I'm wanting to use my iPad it will be in a location that has wireless available, such as airports, a hotel, restaurant, coffee shop, conference center, the office or my home. Our Executive Editor, Darren Root, CPA.CITP (a noted Mac fan) wanted the additional mobility,

so he opted for the 3G model (see his column at www.CPATechAdvisor.com/go/2841).

Professional Basics

At the Denver conference, most of my daily activities consisted of taking notes during keynotes, educational sessions, interviews with company executives and product managers, and also communication functions, such as checking in on my email, keeping up with national, world and technology news, and posting updates to our website and blog (www.CPATechViews.com).

Of course, I also spent time posting and “socializing” with professional and personal friends on Facebook and Twitter, and playing a few games or working on the latest Sudoku.

I could have done all of these things with a laptop or even a smartphone, but not in the same way. A laptop takes how many minutes to turn on and find a wireless network and log in? It’s portable, yes, but not exactly something you want to carry around with you all day just because you might need it for intermittent use. A smartphone would offer an even more lightweight option, but accessing all of these functions is not usually as intuitive, and the QWERTY keyboards on smartphones, including my Motorola, on BlackBerrys and even the iPhone, are tiny. But I was able to use the iPad’s large touch-screen keyboard fairly accurately and with nearly the same speed as a traditional keyboard. An external wireless Bluetooth keyboard can also be used with the iPad.

Better Size/Better Speed

The iPad, however, is very lightweight (1.5 lbs) and turns on in about two seconds. Actually, if it is “hard off” it can take 20-30 seconds to reboot, but I find that I turn it off about as often as my phone, which is essentially never. And even though it is, therefore, “on” all the time, it can last through an entire day of use. While at the conference, I left it turned on all day, and it never dropped below 50 percent battery charge. A laptop certainly can’t boast that, unless you’ve brought extra batteries (plural).

So it’s portable and quick and has a screen size that is much more functional for reading documents and spreadsheets, viewing websites, or using entertainment functions.

Microsoft Outlook Integration

I was surprised and very impressed with the iPad’s integration with Outlook email, contact management and calendaring. As a frequent remote user of these

programs, the iPad interface is much better than the traditional web-based Outlook server access to those features. As I mentioned above, I was also pleased by the full-size touch-screen QWERTY keyboard. I've tried to use an iPhone keypad, but it just wasn't a fit for me.

While I think the iPad wouldn't replace a laptop for travelers who need full computing and processing functions, it really was a good fit as far as providing me with virtually all of my mobile computing needs during a conference event. I had full access to anything web-related that I needed, as well as a great email and scheduling system, access to news and information, my digital music, and I was able to rent two movies by download and watch them on the device while traveling. And when traveling, my tech needs are less than when I'm reviewing technology products or when hunkered down in deadline mode, just as your needs as a tax and accounting professional are different when you're at a tradeshow or visiting a client office than when you're more involved in a client engagement at your office.

Therefore, in the near-term, I see the iPad as a great device for users who don't necessarily need traditional "computer program" capabilities, but are more interested in total access to basic work communications (email/contacts/etc.), full Internet mobility in a larger view format than a phone, and great entertainment options. So it can definitely replace a laptop for those who mainly use their laptops just for communication and basic document functions when traveling, or can act as a mid-range tool such as the way I used it at the conference. In the longer term, however, as more and more professional and personal software programs go to web-based (SaaS) platforms, a device such as the iPad may be all that a professional needs.

So, while I'm not running out to buy the latest MacBook, getting an iPhone or joining the other Apple Kool-Aid drinkers, I will say this to the Mac fans: As far as the iPad ... I get it and I love it.

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