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What About Tablets Now?

Suddenly, it may be that the emperor is not wearing any clothes.

Dave McClure • Aug. 25, 2011

The sudden death of the HP Touchpad tablet sparked a firestorm this week that only got worse when the company dropped the price to only \$99 and sold off nearly all of the rest of its inventory.

Granted, the Touchpad was at best a lackluster me-too product in a field that has now become saturated. Reviewers found it bloated, slow, and lacking in any breakthrough features that would differentiate it from the glut of tablets running everything from iOS to Android to Blackberry's new QNX operating system. But the sudden withdrawal of a tablet by a major manufacturer has suddenly called into question the whole viability of tablets as a business device.

Suddenly, it may be that the emperor is not wearing any clothes.

Granted, tablets represent a terrific opportunity for business people. As a class, they are powerful (1 GB processor speed, 1 GB RAM), have the ability to interconnect via bluetooth, wifi or cellular (depending on the model purchased), and are lightweight. For a person like me, it seemed a great alternative to lugging around a chunk of iron like the typical laptop. After all, what I want is a device that can handle email and web browsing, in a screen size that I can read without glasses (frank admission: I wear reading glasses for most restaurant menus and some web pages).

But I am an unusual road warrior. Most people need to do much more than I when they travel. Like composing blog entries, posting reports and releases, and otherwise

typing on the device. Like editing spreadsheets, and reading PDF documents. Like filling in forms online.

And frankly, tablets are little better than smartphones for these purposes. Sure, they have stunning graphics. They can play YouTube videos all day long, allow you to follow your friends on FaceBook, or play movies on a long plane flight. But they seem to be little more than smartphones with a slightly larger screen for these kinds of applications. And how many people really need a \$600 device to do these things? Save yourself \$300 and buy a netbook.

Like most geeks, I am an early adopter to most new technologies, and tablets are no exception. Having tested a number of models, I settled on the Blackberry Playbook, which makes a great companion to my Storm II cell phone. But that doesn't mean I would recommend it to another user. I love it; you may not.

And that's really the problem with the whole class of tablets. For those of us who love the format and the style, and have reached some accommodation with the major flaws that every one of these devices seems to have, the tablet is wonderful. But I fear that we are not the majority, and that the tablet PC will never be more than a niche player for the road warrior.

At this point, about a hundred readers are pounding their keyboards in outrage that I would say something less than cheerful about the iPad/Galaxy/Playbook/ASUS/Generic tablets they love. But let me pose a simple question.

I know that you may love your tablet for your own use. But would you recommend it to a Fortune 1000 client, who might spend upwards of \$100,000 to deploy these tablets to their workforce. I mean, would you lay your reputation and future revenue on the line to recommend your company or clients take on tablets as they are today?

I didn't think so. Me, either.

I will say that I think the tablet PC may be like the smartphone — starting as a niche in the larger market, but growing and improving over time to go mainstream. I would like that.

In the mean time, there is a lot that needs to happen, not the least of which being that these devices have to lose their early adopter, sky-high pricing in favor of something that actually competes with a netbook or laptop for price. And gain some

functionality that stretches beyond 1982-style video games or calorie conversion charts.

I know; some of them already do. But not well, and not without major investments in time and application software.

Would I recommend a tablet if it met all the criteria for the needs of road warriors in our industry? Sure. In fact, if I were going to invest in a tablet today, it would be the...well, let's save that for another day.

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