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TECHNOLOGY

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Amazon launches new Kindle Fire tablets in UK

Amazon has unveiled three new Kindle Fire tablets at an event in California.

The Kindle Fire HD comes in two options: either with a 7in (17.8cm) screen or an 8.9in (22.6cm) one. That pitches the latter directly against Apple's slightly larger iPad, the bestselling tablet on the market.

A third device upgrades its original model and cuts its price.

Amazon said the first Kindle Fire had captured 22% of the US tablet market - the only country it was sold in.

The 7in Kindle Fire HD with 16 gigabytes of storage will cost £159 in the UK, and the lower-end Kindle Fire £129. Both will be available for delivery from 25 October.

By contrast the iPad 2 is sold for £329; the Google Nexus 7 and Samsung Galaxy Tab2 7 for £199; and the Kobo Arc tablet for £189.

The 8.9in Kindle Fire HD is only being released in the US at this time, where it will become available in November.

All the Kindle Fire devices will show "special offer" adverts on their screens when their displays are put into lock mode.

Amazon's share price closed 2% higher.

Improved connectivity

Chief executive Jeff Bezos said the HD models featured stereo speakers, an HDMI port - making it easy to connect to a television - and a laminated touchscreen to reduce glare in sunlight.

They are powered by a processor made by Texas Instruments.

In addition, they contain two wi-fi antennas and Mimo (multiple-input and multiple-output) radio wave technology to improve their connection to the internet. The bigger model can be bought with 4G connectivity at a higher price in the US.

Technology analysts thought the devices could pose a serious challenge to the market leaders.

"This could easily be the product that beats the iPad particularly for those of us who are readers, easy and innovative in design and use, with unique features like X-Ray which allows you to become far more intimate with what you are reading," said Rob Enderle, principal analyst at the Enderle Group.

Francisco Jeronimo, research manager at IDC added: "Amazon's tablet provides a richer user experience than the Google Nexus 7 or any other 10in Android tablet on the market - the content is embedded in the hardware in such a way that it seems a feature of it and not an application that comes with it for users to open when they need to access media."

However, another industry watcher had a more reserved take on the launch.

"On paper the Kindle Fire HD is a good product but we shouldn't get carried away," said Chris Green, principal analyst at Davies Murphy Group Europe.

"The Android market is deeply competitive and there are better specced models out there, so it's not going to run away with the whole market.

"Also we have still to hear from Apple about its new iPhone and a rumoured smaller iPad, both of which will impact sales."

Price war

Amazon's strategy for its low-end Kindle Fire caught many observers by surprise. The device features more RAM memory and a faster processor than its predecessor but has had its price cut by about 20% to \$159 (£100).

Jan Dawson, chief telecoms analyst at Ovum, suggested Amazon might have felt forced to make the move.

"Amazon is clearly spooked by Google's Nexus 7 coming in at \$200 for a much more capable device," she said.

"It's upped its own hardware specs while reducing the price, which is clearly an attempt to keep it somewhat attractive in the face of that new competition from Google and Asus."

Illuminated e-reader

Mr Bezos also unveiled a new dedicated ebook reader called the Kindle Paperwhite which will be released at the start of October - initially as a US-exclusive.

It can display sharper text and more detailed images than previous models and features a "patented light guide" to illuminate its touchscreen, allowing it to be used in the dark.

The model - which is available with built-in 3G connectivity at an extra cost - will face competition from the existing Nook GlowLight and the upcoming Kobo Glo e-readers which also feature a built-in light source.

Although the UK will have to wait for the Kindle Paperwhite, the company's basic model has had a minor upgrade and a price cut to £69.

That is more expensive than the low-end Kobo Mini which costs £60, but cheaper than Sony's PRS-T2 Reader which costs £119 and Elonex's elnk 621EB which is £99. Details of how much the Nook e-reader will cost in the UK have not yet been disclosed.

"Amazon has a massive advantage in the UK because of its brand name and the fact it will have its devices promoted and sold in Waterstones book stores later this year," Philip Jones, deputy editor of the Bookseller magazine said.

"But I wouldn't write off the Nook or Kobo at this point.

"Barnes and Noble has done well in the US, and, if it puts a bit of oomph behind the Nook's launch, it could gain some traction... and Kobo has the cash of a rich parent, Japan's Rakuten, to support it."

Rumours that Amazon would unveil a smartphone proved to be unfounded.

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