

theguardian

Success for the iPad's tablet rivals is not set in stone

Several firms are launching competitors to Apple's market-leading device, but all seem to have flaws

**Juliette Garside**

guardian.co.uk, Friday 18 November 2011 20.11 GMT



Hewlett-Packard's TouchPad tablet: withdrawn after 48 days on sale. Photograph: Richard Levine/Alamy

The quest to create a tablet computer to rival Apple's iPad is fraught with danger. The world's largest PC maker, Hewlett-Packard, charged in this summer, only to cancel its TouchPad – now dubbed the "OuchPad" – after just 48 days on sale. Samsung has withdrawn its Galaxy Tab from some markets after a patent battle with Apple, while Amazon's hotly anticipated Kindle Fire has hardly set the reviewers alight.

This week, the boss of Nokia's French business let slip that the world's largest phone manufacturer was moving into the market too, and would be ready with its first tablet by next June. Having just relaunched its smartphone business in a bid to re-enter a market that has destroyed its bottom line and threatens its very existence, Nokia cannot afford a failure – but tablet sales are booming. Apple chief executive Tim Cook believes tablets will soon outsell laptop and desktop computers.

Apple has created a genuine desire for a more tactile, armchair-computing experience, and the research firm Gartner expects 64m tablets to be sold worldwide this year, and more than 100m next year. An estimated 46m iPads will sell by Christmas; the second-best-selling category will be the multitude of devices running on Google's Android system (11m), raising the question of whether the tablet computer market will ever develop into more than a one-brand product.

Apple has form: the MP3 player was not invented by Steve Jobs, but he made it popular and in the face of the iPod's unstoppable rise other manufacturers simply gave up.

Francisco Jeronimo, an IDC analyst, believes competitors will not make that mistake again. "When the iPod launched, no one paid much attention. Whatever Apple does now, everyone follows straightaway. Nokia learned in the hardest way that missing a trend is

missing market share. It may take one or two more years, but there will be someone able to compete with Apple."

Competitors are reacting faster than they did against the iPhone. Then, it took three years for equivalent smartphones to arrive. But the original iPad launched in March last year, and Samsung's Galaxy Tab is already regarded as a contender.

That is probably why Apple has spent a fortune on legal bills, taking the South Korean manufacturer to court for patent infringement in more than 20 markets around the world from Germany to Australia.

One of the supposed iPad-killers was Amazon's Kindle Fire. Amazon is not a technology company but it can give buyers discounted access to the world's largest video and music shop, and at \$199 (£125), the Fire is considerably cheaper than the iPad. It is not on sale in the UK until next year but Americans are expected to buy 3m-5m units by Christmas.

However, the reviews have been underwhelming. It may well tempt the more technologically timid, but has been dismissed as a viewing screen rather than an alternative laptop.

"It's a market that can be defined as iPad and everyone else," says Gartner analyst Michael Gartenberg. He believes Amazon's tablet will find a sizeable following, but says that its computing power is to the iPad what electric cars are to four-wheel drive trucks.

Some had hoped that RIM's BlackBerry-based tablet, the PlayBook, would prove popular among the millions of corporate users that have adopted its sister mobile phone.

But the launch earlier this year was a huge disappointment: the tablet had no email, calendar or messaging access without being connected to a BlackBerry via Bluetooth. Hardly a recipe for attracting new customers.

What Amazon, Samsung and others using the Android operating system lack is software that communicates seamlessly across a multitude of devices, especially computers. This is important because it makes transferring films or documents from one to the other headache-free.

The only company other than Apple making software that operates laptops, tablets and phones is Microsoft. And that is probably Nokia's single biggest advantage in launching a tablet: it already uses Windows for its new smartphone, launched this week, and next year's tablet will run on Windows 8, the first version of Windows designed for both tablets and PCs.

The holy grail of an iPad killer may never be found, but Apple's competitors are not ready to give up just yet.

The rivals

Apple iPad

Launched: March 2010

Price: from £399

Number shipped: 40m

What the critics say:

"The iPad is still the only tablet that really matters ... It is perhaps the most deeply