

iPad blurs line between devices

Brad Stone

After months of feverish speculation, Steven P. Jobs introduced Wednesday what Apple hopes will be the coolest device on the planet: a slender tablet computer called the iPad.

For all the hoopla surrounding it, however, the question is whether the iPad can achieve anything close to the success of the iPhone, which transformed the cellphone and forced the industry to race to catch up.

Apple is positioning the device, some versions of which will be available in March, as a pioneer in a new genre of computing, somewhere between a laptop and a smartphone. "The bar is pretty high," Mr. Jobs acknowledged. "It has to be far better at doing some key things."

Half an inch thick and weighing 1 1/2 pounds, the device will vividly display books, newspapers, Web sites and videos on a 9.7-inch glass touch screen. Giving media companies another way to sell content, it may herald a new era for publishing.

But the iPad, costing \$499 to \$829, also lacks some features common in laptops and phones, as technology enthusiasts were quick to point out. To its instant critics, it was little more than an oversize iPod Touch. A camera is notably absent, and Flash, the ubiquitous software that handles video and animation on the Web, does not work on the device.

Another thing missing is an alternative to the AT&T data network, which is already buckling under the strain of traffic to and from iPhones. Some versions of the iPad can, for a monthly fee, use a 3G data connection like cellphones, but the only carrier mentioned was AT&T.

The event, in typical Apple style, was tightly scripted and heavy on theatrics and hyperbole. But the success of the iPhone, and the hive of rumors and leaks surrounding the iPad, raised expectations and made this perhaps Mr. Jobs's most highly anticipated product unveiling yet.

It was one that he clearly cared deeply about. Mr. Jobs, a consummate showman, presented the iPad to an enthusiastic crowd of around 800 employees, business partners and journalists, some of whom shoved their way in when the doors opened to grab the best seats. It was only his second public appearance since a leave of absence for health reasons last year.

Mr. Jobs posited that the iPad was the best device for certain kinds of computing, like browsing the Web, reading e-books and playing video.

The iPad "is so much more intimate than a laptop, and it's so much more capable than a smartphone with its gorgeous screen," he said in presenting the device to a crowd of journalists and Apple employees here. "It's phenomenal to hold the Internet in your hands."

One question Apple faces is whether there is enough room for another device in the cluttered lives of consumers.

"I think this will appeal to the Apple acolytes, but this is essentially just a really big iPod Touch," said Charles Golvin, an analyst at Forrester Research, adding that he expected the iPad to mostly cannibalize the sales of other Apple products.

Mr. Golvin said book lovers would continue to opt for lighter, cheaper e-readers like the Amazon Kindle, while people looking for a small Web-ready computer would gravitate toward the budget laptops known as netbooks.

But other analysts say they have heard similar criticism before — once aimed at the iPhone, which has now been bought by more than 42 million people around the world. These believers say Apple's judgment on the market is nearly infallible.

"The target audience is everyone," said Michael Gartenberg, vice president for strategy and analysis at Interpret, a market research firm. "Apple does not build products for just the enthusiasts. It doesn't build for the tens of thousands; it builds for the tens of millions."

Apple says the iPad will run the 140,000 applications developed for the iPhone and the iPod Touch, but the company expects a new wave of programs tailored to the iPad.

One of the most significant applications for the iPad may be Apple's own creation, called iBooks, an e-reading program that will connect to Apple's new online e-bookstore.

Mr. Jobs said Apple so far had relationships with five major publishers — Hachette, Penguin, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster and Macmillan — and was eager to make deals with others. Publishers will be able to charge \$12.99 to \$14.99 for most general fiction and nonfiction books.

Apple's announcement that it was diving into the growing e-book business put the company on a collision course with Amazon. Mr. Jobs credited Amazon with pioneering e-readers with the Kindle but said "we are going to stand on their shoulders and go a little bit farther."

John Doerr, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who serves on Amazon's board and is also an adviser to Apple, said there could be room for both companies, noting that Amazon sells many books to iPhone owners who use its Kindle application, which will also work on the iPad.

"I don't think Jeff Bezos is going to leave the e-book business," he said, referring to Amazon's chief executive, "and I don't think it will be confined to the Kindle."

Three models of the iPad, \$499 to \$699, will connect to the Internet only via a local Wi-Fi connection. Three other versions will include 3G wireless access and will be available later in the spring, costing an additional \$130 and requiring a data plan from AT&T. Owners of the iPhone who already pay at least \$70 a month to AT&T will not be getting any breaks.

Other companies have sold tablet computers for years, but they never caught on with consumers. In 2001, Bill Gates predicted at an industry trade show that tablets would be the most popular form of PC sold in America within five years.

"The fact that he and Microsoft didn't deliver is surprising," said Tim Bajarin, a longtime industry analyst. "It has taken Apple to bring this to consumers and make it work."

Apple has been working on a tablet computer for more than a decade, according to several former employees. Improved technology has helped the company to finally bring a model to market, as has the ubiquity of wireless networks.

The success of the iPhone and its cousin, the iPod Touch, have shown a path for tablets. People have been willing to pay to customize those devices with applications, turning them into video game machines, compasses, city guides and e-book readers.

The iPad will be a big opportunity for software developers, said Raven Zachary, president of Small Society, an iPhone development company based in Portland, Ore. "Although I think some of us were a bit surprised we only have 60 days until it launches to develop for it."

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