

After iPad, rivals offer variations on a theme

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Just as Apple's iPhone shook up a complacent cellphone industry, the company's iPad is provoking PC makers — and non-PC makers — to fight back with new devices.

Google — a search and advertising company — is soon expected to begin selling its version of a slate computer, like Apple's iPad, while Nokia — the world's biggest cellphone maker — is planning to enter the digital book market through a slate-cum-e-reader as well.

Microsoft, the maker of computer software, is flirting with the idea of selling its own version of a slate, joining traditional computer companies like Hewlett-Packard that have already committed to such products.

In part, these companies are feeling the pressure to respond to the iPad, which went on sale April 3. But their decisions to develop the hybrid products also demonstrate their desire to expand their core businesses, and to experiment with varying kinds of business models and technologies.

For consumers, it could all be good, as more companies offer their version of the slate, a new breed of consumer electronics, in a design free-for-all. The products, which will generally cost less than \$600, provide different, and in some cases unusual, features that reflect the companies' visions of what matters most to people.

"We're living in extremely exciting times right now," said Olli-Pekka Kallasvuo, the chief executive of Nokia. "It's quite challenging to define what industry we are in because everything is changing."

Historically, Microsoft has been the biggest champion of tablet computers, which let people scrawl on a computer screen with a stylus just as they would on paper. And over the last few years, the big makers of personal computers, like H.P. and Dell, have taken Microsoft's software and built such tablets. But their devices have been similar, and limited in what they offer. The software, based on Microsoft Windows, never seemed flexible enough to fit a variety of mobile computers.

Now there is much more software and hardware available to build low-cost, capable, hand-held devices, called slates, that are thinner, lighter and typically omit physical keyboards altogether.

Apple, Google and Nokia all have their own software platforms, with Intel, Nvidia, Qualcomm, Broadcom and Marvell rushing to provide the chips for this next wave of products. Meanwhile, Microsoft is considering building its own slate hardware to try to offer as cohesive a package as Apple and the other competitors.

Apple says it sold more than 450,000 iPads in the first few days after the device was available. Consumers were drawn to Apple's cachet and the fresh approach to computing that the iPad represents, with its elevation of a touch screen and entertainment over a keyboard and productivity.

But commentators and consumers have also been talking about what the iPad lacks — for example, a camera and the ability to display much of the Web's entertainment content, like videos, if presented in the Flash format. The iPad has also been criticized for its inability to allow users to multitask, but the company announced on Friday that it will have that ability in the fall. Another drawback to the iPad is that it relies on a cellphone chip, with less horsepower than a computer chip.

H.P.'s version of the iPad is expected to be released by midyear. Notably, it will have a camera, as well as ports for add-on devices, like a mouse. Also, it will, the company says in a promotional video, "run the complete Internet," including videos and other entertainment.

Phil McKinney, the chief technology officer in H.P.'s personal systems group, said in a recent interview that the company had been working on its tablet for five years. It delayed releasing the product, he said, until the price could be lower.

The company's marketing department has been trickling out online videos of the device. This kind of early marketing is a change for H.P., which rarely talks about yet-to-be released products. Mr. McKinney, however, said H.P. had felt little pressure from Apple's early move and would release its slate when it was ready.

"I have one sitting on my desk," Mr. McKinney said. "We don't react or respond to competitive timing and those types of issues."

Acer, Dell and Lenovo all have slates in the works as well. But Apple may face the biggest risk from the offerings of nontraditional computer makers.

Google, for example, has been working with several hardware manufacturers to push its Android software, which was originally designed for mobile phones and is a direct competitor to Apple's iPhone operating system. The company also hopes to make its own apps marketplace available for new slate-like devices.

But Google is going one step further, exploring the idea of building its own slate, an e-reader that would function like a computer.

Eric E. Schmidt, chief executive of Google, told friends at a recent party in Los Angeles about the new device, which would exclusively run the Android operating system. People with direct knowledge of the project — who did not want to be named because they said they were unauthorized to speak publicly about the device — said the company had been experimenting in "stealth mode" with a few publishers to explore delivery of books, magazines and other content on a tablet.

H.P. is also working on a slate that would run the Android system; this has been nicknamed "the half-pint," because it measures about six inches diagonally, smaller than the iPad.

Microsoft has generated some Apple-esque buzz on blogs as well as through leaked videos of the prototype of its slate, the Courier. According to a Microsoft employee who has seen the device, the Courier is about as big as an ordinary paperback and folds out to reveal two screens. Users would be able to take notes on the device with a pen, and easily drag and share content between the screens.

But Microsoft engineers have concerns about the battery power needed to keep the two screens going, these people said. And internally the company is struggling to identify the right market. At first the idea was to market the Courier for designers and architects, but lately the company is thinking of a broader market of consumers and so would include e-books, magazines and other media content on the device.

Microsoft engineers have talked about getting the Courier out by early 2011, though no firm decision has been made to sell the product.

At Nokia, meanwhile, a team of engineers, designers and publishers are working on designing an e-reader, with the hope of making the company dominant in the digital books and apps marketplace.

Mr. Kallasvuo of Nokia declined to comment specifically on an e-reader but said that a small laptop released last year by Nokia had been well received, and that the company continued to explore new types of “converged” devices.

“The consumer will obviously have much more choice when it comes to where or what I want to connect to,” Mr. Kallasvuo said.

He argued that Nokia had more reach through its broad international sales channels to distribute content and more experience dealing with local content in countries like India and China than, say, Apple or Google.

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