

Apple's New iPad - Tool or Toy?

To satisfy my “recurring, relapsing, techno-lust”, I visited the Apple store to see the new iPad computer. It is an impressive piece of technology, but I didn't buy one because I already own at least one device that does what I would expect of the iPad. But it might be perfect for you, so let's talk about its major features.

The iPad is eight by ten inches and half an inch thick. The top is mostly a bright touch-sensitive display screen and looks like a large version of Apple's iTouch or iPhone devices. Its chief advantages are portability and ease of use and its usefulness is rated somewhere between a smartphone and a small laptop computer.

Available Models

There are two models, each of which comes with 16, 32 or 64 gigabytes of memory. The first connects to the Internet using only wireless (Wi-Fi) technology. The second can connect to both wireless and the newer 3G cellular networks offered by Telus, Rogers and Bell. To use a cellular network you must also purchase a subscriber identity module (SIM) card and a data service plan. Unfortunately, the networks do not yet allow you to share a single data plan between the iPad and any other device.

Hardware

The iPad uses the touch-sensitive screen to display a full-sized keyboard, suitable for touch-typing. A cable is provided to connect to a USB 2.0 port on a desktop computer for synchronizing data and charging the battery. Among other accessories, Apple sells an external keyboard and a protective case that can act as a viewing stand. Surprisingly, no earphones are provided and there are no USB ports for connecting external devices.

Operating System

The operating system is easy to use. It is only capable of running one application at a time. Apple provides the free iTunes program for synchronizing files between the iPad and a desktop computer. iTunes also connects to an on-line store where users can purchase applications, music and videos.

Internet Browser

The Safari browser application works whenever a wireless or cellular Internet connection is available. One current limitation is that Safari cannot display the “Flash” video format used on many websites.

Mail, Contacts & Calendar

Applications are included for managing email messages, contacts and an events calendar. It is unclear how well these applications can be synchronized with similar desktop applications, as Microsoft Outlook.

Music & Video

The iPod application plays music on the iPad's internal speakers. The Video application plays movies, TV shows and other videos. Both music and video files are available from the “iTunes Store”. These features make it attractive as a source of personalized entertainment during long trips.

iBooks

The iBooks application provides competition for the Kindle and other book-reading devices and offers unique book-marking and search features. Books can be downloaded from the iTunes Store.

Photos

The Photos application allows the iPad to be used as a digital picture frame for storing and organizing photos. An adaptor is available to connect directly to a digital camera.

Cellular Phone

The iPad can function as a cellular phone or speakerphone when connected to a 3G network. But its large size will limit this usage.

Software Applications

A wide variety of application programs are available, including those written for the iPhone. These include Apple's own Pages (word processor), Numbers (spreadsheet) and Keynote (presentations) which are similar to the Word, Excel and PowerPoint applications found in Microsoft Office.

Medical Applications

Many mobile medical software vendors have adapted their programs to run on the iPhone. They will be easier to read on the larger iPad display, making it a useful quick-reference tool.

The Bottom Line

For now, I'll stick with a basic cell phone, an iTouch for music, and a PC desktop for serious computing. I might change my mind if I find more useful iPad applications. If you would like more information about the iPad, visit the websites mentioned below.

Apple

www.apple.com/ca

support.apple.com/manuals/#

The Apple website provides detailed information about the iPad and its features. The second site provides the complete user manual.

iPad in Canada

www.ipadincanada.ca

This website offers useful up-to-date information about the iPad, including a comparison of the data plans available from the Telus, Rogers and Bell networks.