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Computer Active

August 13, 2011

LENGTH: 6580 words

HEADLINE: Android, iPad, BlackBerry and Windows tablet group test

BODY:

Tablet usage has exploded in the past two years, largely on the back of the success of the original iPad. Most major manufacturers now have a tablet on the market and are trying to woo business users.

Computer Active India has rounded up seven of the best and put them through their paces. For those yet to invest in a tablet, take a look at our head-to-head table and comparison table on page 5 to help you decide.

Acer Iconia Tab W500

The Acer Iconia Tab W500 is a Windows 7 hybrid tablet/laptop aimed at business professionals on the move.

Despite being sold as a standalone 10.1in tablet, the keyboard attachment is imperative for many users to get the most out of the device. One of the major reasons for this is that Windows 7 was not designed to be used with a touch screen.

Our impressions of the W500 were mixed as it isn't as striking as the iPad 2. Technical specifications are impressive on paper, with an AMD C-50 dual-core 1GHz processor, 2GB of DDR3 RAM and 32GB of internal storage as standard.

The device comes with an overall Windows Experience Index rating of 2.8. Compare this to the Fujitsu Lifebook PH530's Windows Experience rating of 2.7, which is a slightly misleading score as the graphics capabilities brought the overall score down.

The 10.1 widescreen LCD touch display comes with a resolution of 1,280x800, and has a bright picture thanks to the LED backlight. Surrounding the screen, however, is a large black bezel that looks like it could have been better used.

Our measurements suggest that Acer could have increased the screen size to 12 inches. The fact that the extra space hasn't been used is even more bizarre considering that the majority of this unused bezel is part of the LCD panel itself.

Other features built into the chassis include a two-in-one card reader, HDMI and USB 2.0 port as well as Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connectivity. Like all the latest tablets the W500 incorporates front- and rear-facing cameras, both at

1.3-megapixels.

Business users are likely to need the keyboard attachment most of the time. To connect the tablet, the screen slots into a USB connector into the keyboard, which appears when a flap is raised.

When the device is not in use, the flap on the keyboard can be folded down and the screen can be placed on top of it, locked in place and carried around like a netbook.

However, the problems start when the W500 is plugged into the keyboard. The device weighs 1kg but most of this is in the tablet, making it top heavy. The W500 needs to be placed on a completely flat surface otherwise there is a risk of it toppling over.

Using the W500 balanced on your lap is very tricky and great care has to be taken to ensure that the screen does not fall out of the dock. During our tests, we found that the W500 was incapable of sitting on the soft surface of a sofa or bed without falling over.

The W500 takes anywhere between five to 10 seconds to detect when a dock has been attached. Although this is not a long time, it gives the impression that the device is sluggish and is likely to get slower as time goes on.

The dockable keyboard itself is usable, but far from the best we have seen. It comes with 84 keys, two USB ports and an ethernet socket.

Letters are generally well spaced in an island style, but they are very shallow and it is easy to misspell words because letters have not been depressed sufficiently.

Unfortunately, there is no trackpad and you are forced to use the FineTrack trackball that sits in the centre of the keyboard. The two mouse buttons are also awkwardly placed on the edge of the keyboard and we found that we often hit the space bar instead of the left click.

For those who have not used a trackball before it will take some getting used to, and the experience can be described as fiddly at best. When using the W500 in the office, we found that plugging in a USB mouse was a necessity.

By comparison, the similarly sized 10.1 Asus Eee Pad Transformer hybrid comes with a full sized trackpad and the ability to fold the screen when the tablet is connected to the dock.

Considering that the Asus Eee Pad Transformer has dimensions of 271x171x12.98mm, which are very similar to the 275x190x15.95mm of the W500, it does feel that it has been left in the dirt by Asus.

Software

Acer ships the tablet with Windows 7 Home Premium, so it is not optimised for business use. However, it will provide a better desktop-like experience than other tablets.

The internet experience resembles that of laptops and netbooks, with access to all browsers such as IE9, Firefox 4, Chrome and Opera.

Preloaded software comes in the form of Microsoft Office Starter edition and the usual anti-virus software free trial. Another feature is the Acer Ring, an interface created to make use of the touch-screen functionality.

Users are able to browse the internet, and access applications such as notetaking, camera and the calculator, from the Acer Ring. The My Journal feature is an aggregator that keeps web site updates, and Clear.fi allows users to search, share, and play back music and video over Wi-Fi.

The onscreen keyboard is the same as on all Windows touch-based devices. It is easy enough to type web addresses, but is not suited to long emails. It is very poor indeed when compared to the virtual keyboards on the iPad and Android tablets.

Battery life fell short of the six hours claimed by Acer and this was disappointing especially when its portability is being touted. The W500 lasted a reasonable two hours and 49 minutes in the the Battery Eater Pro Classic test, which simulates high intensity activity.

In the Reader test, the device topped out at three hours and 21 minutes. Realistically, the battery will last somewhere between these two figures when the dock is connected.

When we used the W500 in the office as a desktop replacement it managed three hours and 20 minutes with 36 mins of hibernation, backing up the result of the reader test.

In comparison, the Android Honeycomb Asus Eee Pad Transformer offers up to 16 hours of battery life when plugged into the dock, and the forthcoming Motorola Atrix lapdock aims to provide up to eight hours.

The iPad 2, meanwhile, lasted 20 hours during our testing. We clocked nine hours of actual use including browsing the internet over Wi-Fi and 3G, watching three hours of video, and a two-hour film. The remaining 11 hours were spent in standby, eight hours of which was overnight.

The design flaws together with the high price to get the dock could put off some users, however the fact that the tablet runs Windows could make it attractive to businesses.

Apple iPad2

Apple's latest iPad will do nothing to harm the company's position in the market, thanks to some welcome enhancements as well as a new colour scheme.

Apple enthusiasts are agog with the new platform, which is selling out in shops across the US and will likely do the same around the world.

Hardware

Straight out of the box, the iPad 2 looks the same as its predecessor, but there are in fact some subtle differences. The 9.7in LED screen is the same size and resolution as the original iPad, but subsequent tear downs have shown it to be not quite an exact copy of the original.

Inside the iPad 2 is Apple's A5 dual-core processor, which the company says will be twice as fast as the A4 in the original iPad, once software has been rewritten for the new architecture. Even with current software however, there is a significant speed bump for general operations and the graphics feel much smoother, with none of the lag in opening and using applications that iPad users are used to.

At 24.1 x 18.6 x 0.86cm the iPad 2 is slightly smaller and around a third slimmer than the iPad, and this is something that regular users of the original notice straight away. Battery life on the Wi-Fi unit is superb. In tests the unit ran from full charge to empty in just under nine hours of heavy use and the company claims the iPad 2 can remain in standby for nearly a month. A large part of this is down to new, thinner battery packs built into the device but software optimisation plays a role. The battery life of the iPad 2 is better than any other tablet on the market today.

Software

Apple's App Store is the largest in the business at the moment and the iPad 2 is easy to download and install new applications onto. However, there are limits to what Apple will allow.

Business application developers are being won over by the platform and there are a respectable range of tools for corporate owners, as well as plenty of consumer software. Installation is simple, although it's impossible to load even free applications without inputting credit card details.

The iPad 2 comes with very few applications preloaded. The biggest addition most users will be using is FaceTime, Apple's videoconferencing application.

Conclusion

The iPad 2 is certainly recognisable as an upgrade and this new model will appeal to both new buyers and existing users.

That said there is no unique point that makes purchasing the new model particularly compelling. The addition of cameras and FaceTime will prove very useful to people who have a lot of friends who are also Apple users but not for contacting anyone else.

Apple's software ecosystem, while good, is also lacking certain key areas of development. Perhaps the most impressive feature of the iPad 2 is the battery life, which even high-end Android Honeycomb devices such as the Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1 and Motorola Xoom don't quite match.

The iPad 2 lasted 20 hours before cutting out. We clocked nine hours of actual use including browsing the internet over Wi-Fi and 3G, watching three hours of video and a two-hour film. The remaining 11 hours were spent in standby, eight hours of which was overnight. Despite still lacking Adobe Flash support and micro-USB connections, the iPad 2 is still arguably the best tablet on the market, offering high-end performance and a well-rounded experience.

Asus Eee Pad Transformer

There were people who laughed when Apple launched the iPad. Firstly, the idea seemed ludicrous: the form factor hadn't existed previously and was not one in which anyone had shown any interest. Secondly, the name was subject to much derision. Now, though, the market is aware of tablets and has accepted them in varying degrees, even when they have ludicrous names.

Well, no name we've seen yet is as bad as Asus' Eee Pad Transformer. But no product has caused as much excitement either. It's an Android Honeycomb tablet with dimensions similar to the iPad's, but with features that could make your laptop redundant.

The Eee Pad does this by offering a two-part solution. The main component is a tablet with a 10.1in screen and the usual features that come with the latest version of Android.

The second component - a keyboard with additional battery - costs extra but aims to allow the Eee Pad to compete with a PC. So does this system work, or will your compact laptop still triumph?

Laptop replacement

To dive straight in, we don't honestly think the Asus system can replace a Windows, Mac OS X or a Linux laptop. Honeycomb is a good mobile operating system, but there are several things about it that don't work as a serious computing platform.

Take, for example, copy and paste. This has never been the strong suit of most smartphones (although Nokia has never had a problem making this feature work). It took ages for Apple to introduce it and, while it does work on a phone, it's nowhere near as slick as on a desktop PC.

To use the Eee Pad like a laptop, you're going to need to copy and paste into and out of documents from time to time.

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This seems to involve transferring your hands from the keyboard onto the touchscreen. The way the docked tablet is angled makes this monstrously difficult and a very poor user experience.

Indeed, attaching the keyboard seemed to affect how we thought of the device. We have no problem using a tablet, but the addition of a dock with a decent keypad seemed to confuse us slightly, as if we were battling against the muscle memory of using a Windows laptop.

We found ourselves hardly using the touch screen, and tried to do everything with the mouse and keyboard. In the same way that Windows isn't designed for touchscreen displays, Android isn't really designed for keyboards and mouse inputs.

And then there's the keyboard shortcuts, which we're used to on all desktop operating systems. On Android, the likes of control+v don't work, and people who use PCs will find this frustrating. To be fair, these are early days for Honeycomb and future updates should improve all these concerns.

We also found that that the trackpad and arrow keys on the Transformer keyboard enticed us to do stupid things quite often. Several times we found our cursor jumping up the screen as we typed (because we leaned on the wrong bit of the keyboard). The good news is that you can switch off the trackpad. The bad news is that you can't turn of the arrow keys.

So far, you could be forgiven for thinking we don't much like the Asus. In fact, the truth is that we have loved every moment we've spent with it. The typing quirks are an irritation, but using the device as a laptop is still plausible.

SD card sockets on the tablet section and a full sized socket on the keyboard dock means that you can add storage, read and manipulate files from a digital camera (Adobe offers a mobile version of Photoshop for free on Android) as well as upload them to the internet.

Office replacement

For office users Polaris provides some simple, but functional, software that enables you to use documents and spreadsheets on the go. We found this a nice environment to work in, and tested it on the train with great success.

The only glitch we found was when the full stop seemed to get stuck. We think this might have been because the keypad wasn't docked properly. It happened only once, though, and we're satisfied it's not a major bug.

File management is also possible via an included application. You can browse either the tablet's micro SD card socket or the keyboard's SD card. The only problem here is that the Android file system is Linux-based.

This might present navigational difficulties for users who aren't familiar with the way Linux is laid out, and finding the keyboard SD card had us puzzling for a few minutes.

Typing on the built-in keyboard is pleasant. The raised keys feel sturdy and very nice to type on. There are shortcut buttons that take you to common functions in Android and can help with the Transformer's other options, like the ability to switch off the trackpad.

There is no wired ethernet, so you'll be stuck on Wi-Fi all the time, something that will no doubt make it a difficult sell for many IT departments. However, wireless performance is great and we had no problems getting it to join our test network.

It's worth pointing out that a version of the Eee Pad will feature 3G at some point soon. We really missed having 3G, and we'd say it's well worth paying the extra to get an Eee Pad with that feature.

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