Breaking Down the iPad: Toy or Tool for Lawyers?

Alan Cohen

The American Lawyer

June 03, 2010

With apologies to the missus, my three weeks with Apple's iPad reminds me of my old dating days. There would be that instant attraction, some really good things in the mix, but all the while I'd be wondering: Just where is this relationship going? The iPad is a terrific device -- for certain tasks. It does a stellar job of playing video, with a crisp, vivid display that puts plenty of laptops to shame. It gets great battery life; ten hours or more on a charge. It makes for surprisingly fast web browsing. And who can complain about a device that starts up at the press of a button? With the right apps -- those specialized add-on programs that have helped make Apple's iPhone the tech world's biggest recent phenomenon -- the iPad will probably do a lot of things very well.

But is that enough to make it a compelling purchase? After all, I already have a phone that does on-the-go e-mail and web surfing (and, because it is an iPhone, can already run more than 200,000 apps). My laptop, not exactly heavy lifting at three pounds, can do most everything else. Apple's CEO, Steve Jobs, calls the iPad a revolutionary device. But does it really bring so much new functionality or convenience to the table that I should add yet another product to my inventory?

That's the question I've wrestled with the past few weeks -- and it's an issue that plenty of lawyers are struggling with, too. One iPhone evangelist I know at a large firm says he's already getting calls from his partners, asking whether they should buy one. He's telling them that it depends on what they hope to do with it (although he did buy one himself). I think that's right. The iPad is great for consuming content -- watching things, reading things, finding things. But at the moment, it's less successful at creating content. Those who want a quick, convenient way to review documents will likely be delighted, and may even find themselves leaving their laptops behind now and then. Those hoping to write and edit long briefs will almost surely be disappointed and will want to keep their computers within easy reach.

Deciding whether an iPad makes sense really means understanding what the device can (and can't) do well -- and how that fits with your needs. I've been using the $499 16-gigabyte Wi-Fi version ($599 32-gigabyte and $699 64-gigabyte versions are also available); if you want an iPad that also works with AT&T's 3G network, add another $130 to the price. I've used it every day since it arrived, sometimes for hours at a time. And I've taken it outside exactly once. My main use has been watching episodes of "Lost" and reading The New York Times while I'm sitting in my kids' room, waiting for them to fall asleep. For that, it's the best electronic device I've ever used. But that's just me. More than any product I know, the iPad lives or dies on how you personally work and play.
To get a sense of how lawyers might use it, I rang up a half-dozen iPhone-toting attorneys, figuring they'd be the most likely early adopters. Four of them already had iPads, one had his on order, and the last, Jeffrey Richardson of Adams and Reese in New Orleans, says he is "waiting for it to mature" but will likely get one. (Richardson's blog, iPhone J.D., is a terrific resource for the iPhone lawyer crowd.) All of the iPad lawyers are using the device mainly to read PDFs on the go without needing to take their laptop. All use a 99-cent app called GoodReader to do this. (I've used it, too -- it has no problems with large, complex PDFs, and I recommend it highly.) And every one of them describes the iPad as a device they don't necessarily need, but that has nonetheless proven valuable.

"I always felt weird popping out a laptop when I'm only going to be in court for a few minutes," says Daniel Friedlander, a lawyer at Jackson DeMarco Tidus Peckenpaugh in Westlake Village, Calif., who also runs the LawOnMyPhone blog. "With the iPad, I have my calendar in front of me when the court is giving dates, I can take notes ... and no one is looking at me like I'm setting up a workstation." Friedlander says he could do all these things on his phone, too, but then people think he's using his phone in court, which doesn't always go over well.

There's also a sense that a lot of apps that work okay on the iPhone will prove to be a lot more effective with the bigger screen and greater processing might of the iPad. Shane McGee, a partner at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal and co-chair of the firm's internet and data protection group, uses an app from Citrix Systems to access Microsoft Office applications running on Sonnenschein's servers. (Your firm needs to be using Citrix's enterprise software for you to be able to do this.) "It's not as good as having the [software] right on the device," he says, "but it means I can log in and use PowerPoint, Word, Outlook -- anything I can do on my desktop." Right now, that means doing everything with the small 3.5-inch iPhone screen. With the iPad's 9.7-inch display, he says, "it will be better."

All that said, how does the device itself stack up? The first thing to note about the iPad is that, in the flesh, it is far more substantial than it appears in pictures. It weighs just one-and-a-half pounds, but it seems heavier. The chassis is all aluminum and glass, which has its pros (it doesn't scream "plasticky") and cons (it does scream "breakable"). You're not going to want to carry this everywhere, and you are going to want to get a case.

The next thing you'll notice is the display, which takes up nearly the entire face of the device. It's fantastic -- bright, vivid, and sharp and capable of displaying high-definition (720p) files. As with any iPhone or iPod Touch, you can download movies and television shows via iTunes, but via iPad-only apps, you can also stream Netflix videos and recent ABC shows (both apps are free, but you'll need a Netflix subscription to stream that company's content). Streaming -- which can choke on a netbook or lower-end laptop -- worked beautifully.

The iPad is also a superior mobile internet device. Surfing -- via an iPad version of Apple's Safari browser -- is very fast. Apple's iPhone OS (used by the iPad, too) doesn't support Adobe's Flash technology, so on some sites you'll see blank "holes" instead of embedded video, but I didn't find that to be a big deal. Web pages generally looked great, and the multitouch interface makes scrolling quick and responsive.
Reworkings of the iPhone's built-in apps -- including Mail, Photos, Calendar, Notes, YouTube, Maps, and Contacts -- all made good use of the expanded screen real estate, giving me more content without overwhelming me (or making the apps any less intuitive). I liked the new Mail app in particular, which let me view the full text of any message alongside a scrollable list of all my incoming mail. It was far more useful than the iPhone version.

As an e-book reader, the iPad fares a bit less well. I've used Amazon's Kindle, Barnes & Noble's Nook, and various iterations of the Sony Reader. All of those devices use a technology called E Ink, which does an uncanny job of replicating the printed page. Given the choice, I'd opt to read a book on one of those instead of the iPad. They're easier on the eyes (in fact, the iPad's super-bright screen is a bit of a disadvantage here; you really need to turn down the brightness to make reading comfortable). And while Apple's iBooks app looks great, it is pretty bare-bones, allowing you to create bookmarks but not annotations. On the plus side, the iPad's fast processor makes it easier and faster to flip between chapters than on the Kindle, and with a backlit screen you can now read in bed without needing to clip on a light.

Apple's iBookstore gets mixed marks, too. Purchasing books is point-and-click simple, but the selection pales next to Amazon's, and if you're looking for something other than a bestselling or "featured" title, browsing is a bit cumbersome. In short: Think of e-books as a bonus feature of the iPad, not the reason to buy one.

Another iPad shortcoming -- although not a wholly unexpected one -- is the on-screen keyboard. Yes, it's much larger than the iPhone version, but at the end of the day you're still tapping on a picture. It works for some people, but it doesn't work for me. Without the tactile feedback that real keys provide, my touch typing is reduced to two-finger pecks. That's okay for short e-mails but not for longer-form writing. While Apple does offer an alternative -- the ability to link the iPad with a true keyboard via Bluetooth or plug it into a $69 keyboard dock (basically, a regular Apple keyboard with a weighted base that holds the iPad in place) -- you've now got one more item to carry around.

A bigger problem is that right now there is only one word processing program designed for iPad -- and it's not Microsoft Word. I found Apple's Pages app ($10) perfectly usable for first drafts, but its ability to convert to and from Word can be sketchy, particularly if you like fancy formatting.

Note too, that like the iPhone, the iPad has no centralized file management system, and no USB port, so you can't just plug in a flash drive and move files onto the device. Apple offers a convoluted system to get files from your computer onto your iPad (and vice versa), using iTunes. I found it far easier just to e-mail myself whatever documents and PDFs I needed (GoodReader users will discover that this app provides many of the file management tools Apple doesn't).

Battery life, on the other hand, was a pleasant surprise. Manufacturers can be optimistic when it comes to their estimates. And as anyone who has ever used a Macbook knows, Apple can enthusiastically share that optimism. But when the company claimed ten hours of power on a charge, that wasn't wishful thinking. My iPad repeatedly got ten hours -- and a bit more -- even when I was playing videos, typically a power-draining task.
Finally, a word about apps. While it's true that just about every iPhone app, including many designed expressly for lawyers, will work on the iPad, there is a caveat. Without special tweaking for the iPad, apps will run in a small, iPhone-size window in the center of the screen. I've been using Facebook like this, and it's clunky. Your other option is to hit a "2x" button to enlarge the app to fill the entire screen. That takes advantage of the iPad's larger display but not its better resolution. Text-based apps, in particular, looked fuzzy.

The key apps for the iPad will be those designed expressly for the device. And while there aren't a lot of those available right now, there soon will be. By the start of January, Apple had sold more than 3 billion iPhone apps. You can bet that developers will try to replicate that success on the iPad. And a new operating system, expected in the fall for iPad (sooner for iPhone), will add more functionality to the device, including (finally!) multitasking.

If you can leverage the iPad's strengths and live with its weaknesses, you probably won't go wrong buying one now. But you certainly won't go wrong waiting awhile. After three weeks with my iPad, I'm cautiously optimistic about our relationship. But as I like to tell my single friends: There's no need to rush.

*Alan Cohen is a freelance writer based in New York.*