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Apple Tablet Hype, Expectations High

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Before his friends buy a cell phone, gaming system or computer, Victor Bunn gets a call. His buddies see the Philadelphia graphic designer as their tech guru.

But there's one question that stumps even Bunn: Exactly when is the Apple Tablet coming?

As Apple's hottest "non-product," the Apple Tablet is part of a digital distribution movement that will eventually change the world of publishing, Bunn predicts.

"I couldn't quote a time table," he says, "but the benefits of digital readers cannot be understated."

Rumors about the proposed Apple Tablet have been swirling throughout 2009. Various blogs and news sources had speculated that the Tablet would be available during the holidays, but several sources - including Digitimes, a newspaper that covers the computer industry in Taiwan and China - are now reporting a rumor that the Apple Tablet won't be released until mid-2010. The most recent speculation: A financial analyst with Oppenheimer in December forecast a product launch in late March or April.

Apple did not return a call for comment, and the company typically does not talk about products that are in the works. Still, the rumors suggest the Apple Tablet would be something like a laptop computer, media pad, and e-book reader all in one device that's about the size of a paper tablet.

If Apple makes a tablet device, it wouldn't be the first company to do so. Both Hewlett Packard and Dell offer tablets, although these devices operate more like convertible notebooks that are lightweight and feature touch screens. In early

December, a start-up technology company called Fusion Garage announced plans to release a tablet PC with a touch screen called the JooJoo.

Even so, all eyes are on the proposed Apple Tablet because it could be an anytime/anywhere content device, says Bryan Gonzalez, a technical project specialist at the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California.

"It's big enough to provide a solid entertainment experience, but small enough to be carried around easily," Gonzalez says. "Much depends on the execution, but given the Net-friendliness of the Kindle and the interface innovation of the iPhone, it's likely to be something special."

Daniel Ernst, Principal of Hudson Research Inc., believes there is a market for the rumored Apple Tablet. The device won't be for everyone, but Apple knows how to deliver successful products, says Ernst, whose equity research firm focuses on technology, media, telecommunications, and consumer sectors.

"It's more of a niche product," he says.

The publishing industry apparently hopes to offer publications in a format specifically for the Apple Tablet. Time Inc. has readied *Sports Illustrated* for Tablet format, reports Peter Kafka of AllThingsD, a technology news website published by the *Wall Street Journal*. Conde Nast also is reported to have prepared its magazine, *Wired*, for the Apple Tablet, as well.

Susan Jacobson, an assistant journalism professor at Temple University, said that looking toward a digital medium is the right way for publishers to move forward. She explained that the Kindle [reading device](#) from Amazon already is established, and readers can get subscriptions to publications through its service. While the Kindle has been successful, the Apple Tablet could go further, Jacobson said, by delivering high definition, full color images that provide the glossy-page magazine experience.

Jacobson also noted that if publishers turn a profit on tablets by using subscriptions, it could change what content is available on a publication's website.

"If the magazines find they can deliver their content successfully via the Kindle or the Tablet, you will see free content on the website dwindle," she said.

But the digital reader format won't just be for the large-scale publishers. Jacobson likens the market to iTunes, where listeners can buy albums and songs from local bands. The same concept might also work for smaller publishers.

What happens if the Apple Tablet either doesn't exist or if it flops?

It won't ruin Apple's brand equity, Ernst says.

"I would say the iPhone is infinitely more important to Apple than a tablet," he points out.

Even so, expectations for the proposed Tablet are high, Gonzalez says, and consumers will demand that the device do more than an iPod or iPhone.

"If the Tablet's only benefit over the iPhone is a bigger screen, then it will join the ranks of the AppleTV in devices that failed to capture the mainstream consumer," he said, referring to a device introduced in 2007 that takes photos, music, and video from the web and displays them on an HDTV.

The bottom line is that products like the rumored Apple Tablet could change publishing as we know it, Bunn says, although it may not happen as quickly as some believe.

"At this point," he notes, "it's still cheaper and easier in some cases to just go out and buy a book, newspaper, or a magazine."