

PlayBook looks strong as a business tool, analyst says

WATERLOO REGION — With the PlayBook finally in play, a key question to ask is how it stacks up in an already crowded tablet field.

Apple's iPad, the first tablet to hit the market a year ago, is generally considered the gold standard in this category, the benchmark that all other tablets are measured against.

But Apple's crown is beginning to look a bit tarnished, says Carmi Levy, an independent technology analyst based in London, Ont.

As a business tool, he believes the PlayBook has already surpassed the iPad.

"RIM's PlayBook is, out of the box, far more capable of supporting document, spreadsheet and presentation-file creation and modification than the iPad is," Levy said in an email.

Apple may make far sexier apps such as those available in its iTunes store, "but the PlayBook helps business users get more done, and that's a core advantage that will play well with RIM's entrenched user base," he said.

After a year of planning and hype, the PlayBook finally went on sale at more than 20,000 retail outlets across North America Tuesday.

It's the first venture into the tablet market for Research In Motion, the Waterloo-based manufacturer of mobile communication devices such as the BlackBerry, which is sold around the world.

No one was storming the doors at retail outlets where the PlayBook went on sale Tuesday in Waterloo Region.

But the device was widely available at local electronics stores, and some shoppers did pull back the covers and venture out early Tuesday to snap up the new 14-ounce tablet featuring a seven-inch screen that retails for \$499 to \$699.

Martin Sonnenberg, a Kitchener building contractor, was one of them.

"I think it will be a good match to my BlackBerry," he said, as he sat in his pickup truck at 6:50 Tuesday morning outside the Future Shop at Kitchener's Sunrise Centre.

The PlayBook will be useful in showing pictures, diagrams and data to clients and customers, he said.

"I'm kind of a BlackBerry fan," Sonnenberg said, although he did admit to one conflict of interest. "My son works in marketing for RIM."



PlayBook sales: Leslie Taylor, a BlackBerry fan, showed up early at the Future Shop in Kitchener's Sunrise Centre, to be among the first to buy a PlayBook.

Record staff

Also sitting outside the Future Shop early Tuesday was Leslie Taylor, office systems manager at Eastforest Homes, a large local home builder. She planned to pick up two PlayBooks for the company's office.

"We want to be the first," she said, when asked why she got up at the crack of dawn. "We're looking at it (the PlayBook) as technology to use in the office and on (the building) site," she said.

Opening day sales were also strong at Future Shop stores in Cambridge and Waterloo, said Elliott Chun, a spokesperson for the Vancouver-based chain.

Although the company doesn't release sales figures, "both had very positive experiences" with the Waterloo store doing particularly well, he said.

All 146 Future Shop stores across the country opened at 7 a.m. Tuesday and "traffic has been very constant," Chun said, noting that about a dozen people were waiting at the outlet in downtown Vancouver. The numbers would have been greater but many people preordered, he said.

Initial sales have also been strong in the business market, where companies such as Manulife Financial, Sun Life Financial and ING Direct have all preordered PlayBooks.

Sun Life, for example, plans to purchase about 1,000 Playbooks so staff can use them to electronically enrol clients in their workplace retirement plans, said Krista Wilson, a company spokesperson.

The company, which has its Canadian headquarters in Waterloo, opted for the PlayBook over other tablets primarily because of its security features, she said.

"We felt the functionality and innovation was important, especially the 128-bit encryption, given the importance of ensuring privacy and confidentiality of client information," Wilson said in an email.

The PlayBook has encountered some early criticism from technology analysts who suggest its app store falls short of the competition, it can't work fully without the BlackBerry and its battery life doesn't live up to advance billing.

But Levy said RIM is only getting started and it's a long-term process.

"Version one of the PlayBook device is a software update or two away from having it all," he said. "Judging the PlayBook exclusively on what it can do on day one is unfair and incomplete."

He believes the PlayBook is easily competitive with the growing wave of competing tablets now hitting the market. With its leading-edge specs, promising software and RIM's reputation as an engineering-driven shop, the PlayBook is positioned for a "relatively successful initial launch," he said.

Levy calls the PlayBook the most important debut in RIM's history, even more critical than the BlackBerry. The company's brand image has taken a battering from Apple and Google's Android in the intensely competitive mobile market and a good showing is needed to reverse that trend, he said.

Once the software gaps are filled, he's optimistic about future prospects for the PlayBook.

"The tablet market is expanding quickly and the PlayBook platform is just good enough to establish a solid toehold."

Nick Bontis, a business professor at McMaster University in Hamilton who follows the mobile market closely, believes the PlayBook's greatest strengths are its processing power and web-browsing experience.

Though RIM was too slow to bring it to market, the tablet proves the company can "manage the design, development and servicing of multiple products and models," he said.

Another potential bonus is "feature incrementalism," Bontis said. Better specs in the PlayBook afford RIM the potential to leap ahead of Apple's offerings, he noted.

Allan Foerster, a lecturer at Wilfrid Laurier University's school of business in Waterloo, said RIM has established a beachhead in the tablet market.

"Depending on the day, the time and the analyst you talk to, some think it's a home run, some think it's a base hit. Nobody has indicated this is a strikeout."

The fact that many of RIM's corporate customers have indicated they want to deploy it is a good sign, Foerster said.