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Technology

Tablets slated to become the fourth screen

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- Experts say it depends on content, price
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THEY could be the next big thing in entertainment and social activity. Jennifer Dudley-Nicholson writes it might be time for your tablet.

ARE you ready to adopt a fourth screen? That is the question gadget makers will pose this year as they create a new breed of computers to depose your laptop, usurp your television and steal from your phone's app collection.



A user browses through the iPad's capabilities. Picture: AP
Source: AP

The tablet computer is set to make an indelible mark on 2010, with manufacturers such as Apple and HP preparing to breathe fresh life into touch screen computing.

These new tablets, or slates, will offer quick and easy internet snacking, entertainment on the go and plenty of social interaction.

But technology experts say their popularity is far from assured and will depend on worthwhile content, price and whether tech-savvy users are prepared to invest time looking at another screen.

Tablet computers emerged in 2001 and add a touch-sensitive screen to a traditional laptop.

Most have screens that spin and fold back on the keyboard, though some tablet computers do not have a keyboard at all.

Tablet computers made up 1.2 per cent of laptops sold in Australia in the last quarter of last year, according to IDC, but recent announcements from Apple and HP are predicted to dramatically boost their numbers.

Both Apple and HP offerings are small and highly portable, feature multi-touch screens similar to the

iPhone, and are designed to entertain.

Telsyte principal analyst Warren Chaisatien says these factors will combine to make the tablet computer a compelling companion to gadgets consumers already own and love.

"We call this new form factor The Fourth Screen because it will be in addition to your TV, mobile phone and laptop," he says.

"This new screen will be centred on entertainment and social activity. For example, you might invite friends and family over for a barbecue and you want to share vacation photos and videos. You could do that on your mobile phone but it's a bit too small, and your notebook is too bulky and heavy, but a tablet would be perfect for something like that."

Mr Chaisatien says tablet computers will also challenge e-book readers such as the Kindle, making them a "niche (product) for book lovers".

But the tablet computer's adoption might not be sudden.

IDC Australia hardware associate analyst Neville Chan says price will play a big part in the success or failure of tablet computers.

"At the moment the one thing that is hindering the take-up of tablets for consumers is price," he says.

Mr Chan says consumers currently pay an average of \$1300 for a laptop, and few are willing to pay more than \$2000.

Gartner enterprise mobility research director Robin Simpson also warns that no tablet computer will succeed without entertaining content and easy-to-install apps.

"There is a long, long, long list of failures of tablet devices stretching all the way back to the (Apple) Newton, the IBM Simon and the GridPad before it," he says.

"Everyone has had a go, but no one has succeeded.

In my view, the main reason for these failures was not so much the technology but the lack of compelling applications and content."

But Mr Simpson says Apple has a proven track record in selling digital music, TV, movies and apps to consumers, giving the tablet computer its best chance at success yet. Only time will tell.

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