

# Adding a Tablet Computer to Your Toolbox

by Robert Shaw

The first computer I used for customer presentations was a Dell netbook (a computer between a smart phone and a notebook in size, intended mostly for accessing the Internet). That was years ago, and since then I've owned various other netbooks and laptops. I still need a laptop or netbook for my business, but for sales presentations and other electronic needs away from the office, I've found that tablet computers are far superior.

I now keep all my job pictures on an Acer Iconia A500 tablet, organized so I can quickly and easily show customers photos relevant to their project. I can use it to snap pictures of clients' yards and homes for design purposes, sketch quick outlines, take notes, and input contact information. I've got a presentation package on it, too — with references, insurance, and licensing information — that I show and email to prospective clients. And if someone would like more information about a product, I just pull up the manufacturer's website right there and we can review it together.

I also use my tablet throughout the day for accessing email, using the PDF and blueprint viewers, and finding my way around with its GPS receiver. That's a lot in a small, easy-to-use package.

## Tablet Options

When you're deciding which tablet to buy, there are several important considerations. Since tablet computers are largely meant for Internet access, you'll probably want a data plan from a national carrier. If you have a smart phone, you may want something with a similar operating system, as you'd

already be familiar with the interface — Android tablets aren't a lot different from Android phones, and Apple iPads are similar to iPhones.

Prices vary depending on the specs of the tablet and whether or not you get a data plan. All the major carriers offer various tablet options and data plans, with discounts on tablets when you sign up for a one- or two-year data contract. Android-based tablets can range from \$350 to \$600 depending on the options you choose. Apple iPad 2 units range from \$500 to about \$800. No-name tablets are available for \$200 or less; however, the quality, expandability, and options are sub-par, they often run older software that's not upgradeable, and they have old-style touch screens that don't perform as well.

Screen size is important for presentations. I tried 7-inch tablets and the screen was just not large enough for my customers to view pictures properly, so I chose a 10-inch model instead.

Consider how much memory you need for storage. Do you have five gigabytes of pictures or 50 gigs? Make sure there is ample room to store new pictures as well.

Other features abound. One option I love is rotation lock, which keeps pictures oriented in landscape mode no matter how I rotate or turn the tablet. A camera is convenient for taking snapshots, and GPS can be very handy. Android 3.1 offers mouse support; having a mouse or keyboard is useful. Tablets with HDMI output can hook up to your customer's big-screen TV, maximizing the impact of your presentation.

Wi-Fi and Bluetooth are built into

almost all tablets but double-check to be sure. Mobile 3G or 4G Internet is also usually built in, but you have to decide whether or not you need a data plan dedicated to your tablet. I use a Sprint Overdrive, a device that allows me to split a mobile broadband signal to multiple users at once, so I can use the tablet, laptop, and netbook if I need to.

## Must-Have Apps

Tablets come with standard apps, such as a calculator, contacts, email, Gmail, Web browsers, a calendar, and maps. Additional apps are easily downloaded from the Android market or the Apple app store directly to your device. There are usually many variations of an app, so if one does not work for you, there may be another that suits your needs better.

I have an Android tablet; here is a quick list of some of my favorite apps. Apple offers similar products.

**Dropbox.** If you have more than one computer, this software is critical. It allows for folder syncing so you always have the same data on multiple computers and devices. Dropbox also keeps an online backup that you can access from any computer. I keep all my client information in a directory from which I can pull down any file and have it right at my fingertips.

**Dropsync.** This app works with Dropbox and allows you to sync a folder to your tablet so it's stored locally, as opposed to the Dropbox app, which pulls down a file over the network when you request it.

**QuickPic.** I like QuickPic because I can set up directory boundaries and display only the pictures that I specify.

Flipping back and forth is simple, with just a drag of a finger. Want more detail? Just zoom in using your fingers to show close-ups of your projects.

*Do It (Tomorrow).* This is a simple task list that works very well.

*WeatherBug Elite.* Knowing the weather forecast can be a time saver — this app does a great job.

*Square.* Square allows you to accept credit cards (the company sends you a free card reader that plugs into your headphone jack). The customer can sign right on your tablet and then receive an email receipt.

*SignMyPad.* This allows signatures on PDF documents.

*AK Notepad.* I like this app for quick notes because it saves as you type. If you get distracted while entering, info does not get lost.

*CamScanner.* With this app, you can convert pictures of documents to PDFs and drop them in Dropbox. Imagine scanning your receipts right away and having digital copies on your laptop or desktop computer when you get to the office.

*OfficeSuite Pro.* This allows viewing and editing of Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint documents. It's not quite the same as on a laptop or desktop computer, but it does fine.

*SBM (SketchBook Mobile).* I use this app for quick drawings and sketches (just don't forget to save).

*PrinterShare.* This allows printing of many document types to many different printers.

Of course, tablets aren't strictly for business. Music, movies, and games can all be accessed on tablet devices. Instead of wasting hours at the building department reading old magazines, you can get some work done, update your Facebook page, play games, or just check out some Web pages. ♦

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