



TECHNOLOGY INSIGHTS

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Netbooks Part 1

Disruptive technology or evolution?

'Disruptive' is marketing jargon for a new idea that makes the establishment squirm. Microsoft and Intel, for example, are both used to market shares around 90% and the lush profit margins that go with that kind of dominance – these guys made the rules. Suddenly, someone else is rewriting them.

Netbooks that fit into a handbag

Asus came up with the idea: a small, highly portable PC that people could use anywhere for simple stuff like email and surfing the web. You've probably seen them in the gadget shops, next to the old familiar notebooks. Asus was the first to offer an A5 sized netbook that weighed less than a kilo. You can still buy an EEE PC with a 7" screen and solid state disk, at a price comparable to a mobile phone.

HP, Dell, and Acer watched the market take off and jumped in with netbooks of their own. Intel also announced a chipset for netbooks – Atom – that promised low cost and low power consumption. Within a year, the pimply adolescent that was the original EEE PC was surrounded by attractive young adults like Acer's Aspire One. Netbook shipments jumped from half a million in Q1 of 2008 to 6 million in the fourth quarter. Analysts are tipping netbook shipments to go as high as 30 million in 2009.

They still have a few pimples left: small screens and few pixels, cramped keyboards, limited grunt and poor graphics. User experience is unremarkable and computer games are out. Netbooks handle the tasks they were designed for: surfing, email, typing and looking at photos. On XP and Linux, at least.

Dollar-to-weight ratio

The rise in the size and price of netbooks begs an obvious question: why wouldn't you buy a Dell Inspiron 1525 for \$795 instead, a full-size notebook with Intel Dual Core 2.0GHz power, 2GB RAM, 160GB HDD, a DVD burner and a 15.4" TrueLife screen? The answer is: dollar-to-weight ratio. The Dell weighs 2.5 - 3kgs, netbooks between 1 - 1.5kgs.

This is the disruptive part: lightweight notebooks used to be 'ultra-portables', and their prices went up at the same rate as their weight came down. Netbooks started at the other end, with simple components chosen for low weight, low battery consumption and low cost.

Dollar-to-performance ratio

The Acer Aspire One netbook pictured above comes with 1gb RAM, a 160mb hard drive and Windows XP. It weighs just under a kilo and costs just over A\$500. Don't ask about battery life because it's a letdown.

Asus lost the top spot to Acer last year but its new EEE PC 1000H features a 4 - 6 hour battery life and comes with a 160gb hard drive, VGA, Ethernet, headphone



jacks and 802.11b/g WLAN. There's no DVD drive or Bluetooth option but 3 USB slots make it easy to plug those in when needed.

At the other end of the scale, we have the A\$1500 Sony Vaio VGN-P15G with a wide, 1600x768 display, 64gb of Flash memory and Windows Vista - a pretty silly idea on a PC running the anaemic 1.3ghz Intel Atom chipset Sony picked for the Australian model. Sony is about lifestyle, of course, and the gadget rivals the MacBook AIR for looks and size (it also fits into an A4 envelope).

Will the netbook boom continue?

Yes, but the boundaries between netbooks, mini-notebooks, subnotebooks, ultra-portables and MIDs (Mobile Internet Devices) are getting fuzzier by the day. The big vendors are adding more fuzz, with Dell's Inspiron Mini 12 entering the cross-dressing stakes with an almost full-size screen, keyboard and trackpad. The Mini 12 weighs just over 1.2kg and sells for around A\$849.

Toshiba's R600 ultra-portable weighs less than a kilo and also provides a 12' screen, a full-strength Intel chipset, sharp graphics, a 200gb hard drive and even a DVD player. Unlike the Dell Mini 12, the R600 runs Vista without its eyes glazing over. Performance is the gap that refuses to close, along with design/materials/build quality. The price gap remains a canyon as well - Toshiba's R600 is \$3,000.

Disruptive technology or evolution?

Whatever we call it, we can't deny that netbooks have moved the goal posts. Companies who used to give their road warriors expensive ultra-portables will now ask: why don't we use netbooks? Consumers will ask the same question and answer 'why not?' unless they want to play games or edit 50mb raw photo files on the run. With Microsoft using its muscle with PC makers to squeeze out the Linux/Open Source folk who initially found a home here, Windows XP will make netbooks an even easier choice.

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