

Apple iPad and Retail Computing

By Mark Gruetzner, Senior Director, Development

First it was the iPhone, and now the iPad. Apple has made quite a splash with both of these revolutionary gadgets. As of April 2010, Apple has sold over 50 million iPhones, and after the first week of availability, over 500,000 iPads were sold. If you are involved with retail execution, you are probably aware of the wide availability of devices that can facilitate excellence at the shelf; and with all the hype around the iPhone and iPad, have likely already considered whether or not one of these devices is the next big thing when it comes to In-Store execution tools.

Like most decisions, there are no easy answers. If it is your job to determine whether or not the iPhone or iPad is the right fit for your retail organization, then a good approach is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each, in the context of how you intend to use them. To help with this analysis, we have taken a look at how RW3 customers currently use their existing device solutions to facilitate retail execution. We then looked at what features the iPhone and the iPad bring to the table, and how the various choices serve different needs in the marketplace.

RW3 customers currently use two major classes of In-Store device solutions. The first are actually not used in the store at all. These are desktops/laptops that are located either at home or in the office. They typically operate with Microsoft Windows, Office, and Internet Explorer, and are used to access web-based RW3 solutions for retail data entry, account authorization, messaging, etc. This solution typically involves a much lower hardware investment, but the tradeoff is zero portability and the use of paper in-store. There generally would be no reason to consider an iPhone or iPad solution in this case, unless you were making the move to mobile computing.

The second class of in-store device solutions facilitates mobile computing. These consist of laptops, tablets, and hand-held devices, running Windows and Windows Mobile. Typically, these devices are used with either an RW3 Windows Forms or Silverlight-based application for retail execution. They are designed such that an Internet connection is needed to synchronize with the back office in the morning and/or evening. They can then be carried into the store and used offline to collect data which is submitted during the next synchronization. Customers who need to access the Internet during store calls may also use available WiFi or 3G connections, if their device supports it or if they have an external "Air Card," for example. Others use tethering solutions, such as via the Blackberry. The advantage of this second class of mobile devices is that they allow RW3 customers to take advantage of the USB ports to utilize external devices such as UPC scanners and signature capturing pads. The data provided by these devices is integrated with RW3 to help improve efficiency during store calls.

The iPhone and iPad belong to the second class of devices, all of which facilitate mobile computing. So how do they compare to what RW3 customers are already using?

Features	Windows Laptop/Tablet	iPhone	iPad
Mobile Internet Connectivity	WiFi or 3G (with wireless contract such as AT&T, Verizon, or Sprint), tether to Blackberry	WiFi or 3G with AT&T contract.	WiFi or 3G with AT&T contract (unlimited data for \$29.99/month.)
Robust User Interface	Large screen allows you, for example, to easily manage In-Store item distribution.	Smaller screen size may limit how much you can accomplish on a single user interface page.	Similar to laptop/tablet in that the large screen allows for a robust user interface experience.
Support for External Devices: e.g. Bar Code Scanners and Signature Pads	Yes, via USB interface. Integrates with RW3.	Limited to none. Camera can be used to scan bar codes, but is slow and clumsy. Signature capture possible, but clumsy without a stylus.	Limited to none. Currently there are no USB ports. There is no camera, either.
Photo Capture	No, unless you use external camera and USB.	Yes, built-in.	No.
GPS Location Awareness	Yes, with external GPS device via USB or Bluetooth.	Yes, built-in.	Yes, built-into 3G models. (Note the WiFi-only model is severely lacking in GPS support)
Support for Microsoft Excel and Office	Yes	Limited to none.	Limited to none.

As detailed above, the iPhone and iPad can certainly fill some gaps when it comes to mobile computing. The iPhone is extremely portable and lightweight, has GPS and photo capturing built-in, and can provide always-on Internet connectivity, assuming you have either WiFi access, or more practically (and more expensive), a 3G data plan with AT&T. The iPad is even more appealing, in that it has a much larger screen, similar to a laptop, which allows you to take advantage of much more robust user interface designs in your retail execution software. For example, you would be able to see an entire item distribution list and be able to easily mark out of stocks, voids, etc., just like on a laptop/tablet. Finally, the iPad also has always-on Internet connectivity, with a much more affordable unlimited data plan, as well as built-in GPS.

However, in their current versions, the iPhone and iPad leave many gaps open as well. Both devices run with the iPhone operating system from Apple. They do not fully support Microsoft Office documents, such as Excel, so accessing common types of Excel reporting is not possible, or at best, is crippled on these devices. Finally, integration with external devices, such as bar code



scanners and signature capture devices is limited to none, most likely due to the lack of flexibility in the iPhone operating system. That could change if Apple were to enhance the operating system, or offer an iPad version with Mac OSX.

Given these gaps, it's safe to say that most RW3 customers would not choose to replace their current mobile in-store computing devices with the iPhone or iPad. However, an iPhone, in particular, could be used as a companion to an existing solution, as could Android and Blackberry devices. The built-in GPS and photo capturing ability of these tools will integrate with the existing RW3 In-Store solution in a seamless and user friendly manner, via Bluetooth or the Internet. If you are interested in seeing this in action, contact your Account Manager or mgruetzner@rw3.com for a Demo!

© *in touch with rw3*; April 2010