The next great read?

Chris Warner, Executive Editor

If you got a head start on your holiday shopping in the days before Thanksgiving, you were greeted at Amazon.com with a message by founder and CEO Jeff Bezos announcing the release of Kindle, the company's handheld e-book reading device.

I have to admit, when a colleague first told me about Kindle, I reacted with a great big yawn. "Another in a long list of e-book readers designed to improve on arguably history's greatest device – the book," I reasoned. And from a company that's not exactly known for its hardware. My colleague forwarded the Newsweek article anyway.

Among the cool features listed on Amazon's product page are its weight and size: 10.3 oz., "lighter and thinner" than a paperback, and judging by the photograph, it appears to mimic the ergonomics of a paperback; it can store more than 200 titles (plus hundreds more via a memory card); the price for New York Times best sellers and all new releases is $9.99 (unless marked otherwise); and there are already 88,000 books available at the Kindle store. Like the Sony Reader, it uses E-Ink Corporation's electronic paper display technology – there's no need for a backlight, and thus it requires less power and produces little heat.

But here's where it parts company with other e-book readers: totally wireless connectivity. It uses an EVDO (Evolution Data Only)-based high-speed data network (called Whispernet), so consumers can use it anywhere, all without a computer or cables. That means the user can purchase an e-book and download it in less than a minute, while relaxing at the beach or riding on a bus. The best part? The Whispernet wireless broadband is free. Yes, Jeff picks up the tab.

Of course, with the good comes the not-so-good. And while I don't have a unit to test-drive (as I write this, Amazon.com is sold out of the device), the first issue that comes to mind is its pesky $399 price tag. Assuming one only buys hardcover e-books (confused yet?) that are priced at $25 for the physical book, they would have to read 27 books to cover the original investment (not including wireless savings); by that time, of course, it's a good bet that Kindle version 2.0 will be in everyone's hands. Time will tell if this is enough to attract the average reader.

But what about those who aren't your average reader — ie., design engineers. Undoubtedly, engineering texts are a lot more expensive than the $20 to $25 variety found among the bestsellers. So what features would a designer like to see in an e-book reader?
Perhaps it's a way to display graphics in a diagram or to view multiple books at once. Would engineers prefer to buy chapters from a text a la carte in order to educate themselves on a specific technique or application? And is the highlighting feature more preferable than jotting down notes in the columns?

So while the early adopters of Kindle get started on those dozens of bestsellers, I'd like to hear your suggestions for functions or features that would truly make the next chapter of e-book readers more engineer-friendly. Feel free to email me at chris.warner@advantagemedia.com [1] or comment below, and I'll share a sampling of your ideas here– and maybe even the familiar analog version of ECN!

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