

German tablet PC sets out to rival Apple's iPad

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The German maker of a new tablet PC is setting out to rival Apple's iPad with the promise of even more technology such as a bigger screen, a webcam and USB ports.

The touch screen WePad, however, is not an "iPad killer" as it has been dubbed by some blogs but an alternative to its bigger rival, Neofonie GmbH's founder and managing director Helmut Hoffer von Ankershoffen told reporters on Monday in Berlin.

Ankershoffen stressed the system's openness: Two USB-Ports allow users to connect all kinds of devices with the WePad, from external keyboards to data sticks.

People who want to put music on their WePad do not have to have any particular software, Ankershoffen said — a blow at Apple's devices that require particular Apple software like iTunes.

The WePad's basic version, which comes with Wi-Fi and 16-gigabyte storage, is set to cost euro449 (\$600), the larger 32-gigabyte version with a fast 3G modem is euro569.

Ankershoffen claimed that given its technological superiority and greater openness, "that's a bargain compared with the iPad."

The iPad — which hit stores in the U.S. less than a month ago — is on sale there starting at \$499 for the smallest version, coming with Wi-Fi and a 16 GB storage.

The WePad is powered by an Intel chip and relies on a Linux software basis which is compatible with Google's Android and all Flash applications, Ankershoffen said.

When it hits stores starting late July, it will also boast a complete open source office package, he said.

Berlin-based Neofonie — a small company of some 180 employees — claims it already has some 20,000 people interested in signing up for a preorder, even though orders won't be formally accepted before April 27.

Ankershoffen declined to give a sales estimate. "Not thousands, not tens of thousands but many more will be sold before the end of the year," he said.

The device is to be assembled by a manufacturer in Asia — which Ankershoffen refused to name — who can prop up production capacity according to demand, he said.

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Apple's iPad will go on sale in Germany at the end of April, according to the company's German Web site. This would give the iPad roughly a three month lead on its German competitor.

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