

IPAD A FITTING SWAN SONG FOR A VISIONARY

By Chris O'Brien
Mercury News Columnist
Oct. 17, 2011

In a career that spanned decades and yet ended all too soon, Steve Jobs managed to save his best for last.

The success of the iPad was perhaps the most unlikely and remarkable of Jobs' many achievements.

And while many remembrances have noted his "genius" and his "magic," a closer look at why the iPad has been a blockbuster helps us understand the particular qualities that made Jobs special.

In many ways, the iPad epitomizes the way Jobs rebuilt Apple into a consumer electronics juggernaut. He took his time, ignored conventional wisdom, and developed it his way. As a result, it defied the skeptics to become one of the fastest-selling consumer electronic products in history.

As buzz built toward the announcement of some kind of Apple tablet in January 2010, analysts and journalists wondered, what need would it fulfill? What problem would it solve? What devices would it replace?

"I was skeptical along with everyone else," recalled Andrew Eisner, director of content at Retrevo, an online consumer electronics store.

Even when Jobs unveiled it, people ridiculed the name. Remember all those iPad jokes?

Nobody jokes anymore. Not with the company selling 28 million iPads in less than two years. Not with developers creating 135,000 iPad apps that generated more than \$1 billion in revenue in just the first nine months.

So what did Jobs and Apple get so right with the iPad?

The first thing was timing. Jobs waited until all the pieces were in place to create a product that would deliver a sublime experience. Carl Howe, a Yankee Group analyst, noted that there were indications Apple had been working on a tablet back in 2004, but had apparently put it aside to focus on developing smartphones instead.

Apple could have built a tablet back then, but the screen resolutions, chip speeds and wireless networks available would have resulted in an extremely limited experience. Apple was willing to wait.

"It shows what a long game they were playing," Howe said. "They weren't just focused on what was happening the next quarter."

The success of the iPhone then became a steppingstone to the tablet. Jobs knew that people were becoming comfortable with touch screens. And just as important, the iPhone had spawned a community of developers and an app ecosystem that dramatically expanded the utility of the devices.

Creating an emotional connection would be important for the iPad. That's because unlike the iPhone, for instance, which for most people replaced another mobile device, the tablet would be a whole new category of device.

The product had to be about more than the technical specifications. If it could create a sense of wonder and delight, then Jobs believed people would make room in their lives for a new device.

Jobs understood that consumers are not rational in their purchasing behavior, Howe said. Diamonds are just crystallized carbon, but people pay thousands of dollars for them because they signify some great emotional bond.

And so, Jobs talked about the iPad in terms of the experience, how it would make you feel, rather than trying to rationalize the amount of time or money it might save you. It would bring you more happiness; not make you more productive.

"It's not a product that solves a problem," said Jason Calacanis, CEO of app developer Mahalo and an angel investor. "It creates an opportunity. Until you use the iPad for a couple of weeks, you can't appreciate it. But it quickly becomes your primary consumption device" for games, movies and photos.

By 2009, Jobs knew the pieces were in place -- the mobile networks, the app ecosystem, the screens and chip speeds -- to create a product that would elicit that important but intangible sense of wonder and delight the moment a consumer touched it.

"Part of his brilliance was creating something that as soon as you saw it, you wanted it," Eisner said. "People fall in love with their gadgets. And you see this unusual amount of affection transferred from their love of their gadgets to the creator. You see that now in the outpouring of love and grief for the person who gave them so much happiness."