Device buying guide for appraisers

WINTER 2013

Left: Samsung Galaxy Note 10.1
Right: Amazon Kindle Fire HD
Center: iPad mini with Retina® display

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Introduction

We’re in a post-PC world, folks. It’s time to start embracing the devices, operating systems, and other technologies that can unshackle us from our clunky laptops and desktops. Smartphones have outsold PCs for years now, and tablets are already outselling desktop PCs — with the expectation that they will soon surpass laptop PC sales as well. It’s important to have an understanding of not only what tablets are available, but also how to compare one with the other while keeping an eye on which features are truly important to an appraiser.

When choosing a device for your appraisal needs, you have two main considerations: software and hardware. Each has a significant impact on your selection of devices, and knowing some basics about both will help you in deciding which device may be best for you and your workflow.

In this eBook, we’ll discuss both of these aspects in detail. It’s important to understand, however, that the information in this guide is based on what’s available in the mobile device market in the December 2013 time frame. Mobile technology changes quickly, and new devices come and go on a regular basis.

Let’s dive in.

Software

When I talk to appraisers considering devices, there are two main software considerations that come up: the operating system, and the apps that can be installed on top of it. We’ll discuss each of these separately below.

Operating systems

Today, there are three main players in the mobile device operating space. They are:

- **Apple** — Their mobile platform, iOS, powers the iPad, iPad mini, iPhone, and iPod Touch.
- **Google** — Android, which is the most widely distributed mobile operating system in use today, is available on a variety of devices from a number of manufacturers.
- **Microsoft** — Windows 8.1 differs from Apple’s and Google’s offering by building a mobile operating system on top of the traditional desktop version of Windows you’re used to working with today.

Most appraisers today are using either Apple’s iOS or Google’s Android as their mobile device operating system. When you’ve read through the information presented here you’ll have all the details you need to choose the platform that’s right for you.
iOS is a mobile operating system developed and distributed by Apple, Inc. Originally unveiled in 2007 for the iPhone, it has been extended to support other Apple devices over time. Unlike Microsoft and Google, Apple does not license iOS for installation on non-Apple hardware. That's not necessarily a bad thing, though. The closed nature of the operating system, and the fact that it's essentially paired with hardware made by the same manufacturer, mean the overall experience is excellent. You know that the hardware is designed specifically to use that OS.

iOS offers fewer options and configuration settings than either Android or Windows, making it fairly simple to pick up and use. That's attractive to many appraisers. If you're the type of person that prefers for things to just work "out of the box" with little to no customization or configuration, Apple's platform may be the best choice for you. Additionally, iOS behaves exactly the same way on both their phone and tablet offerings. They’ve worked very hard to ensure that anyone who already has one of their devices can pick up any other Apple device and immediately know how to use it without having to re-learn a bunch of new processes or steps. Simplicity is core to how iOS works.

Compatible a la mode software: TOTAL for Mobile, WinTOTAL for Mobile
Google's mobile operating system, Android, was initially developed by an independent company in which Google was a key investor, and then later bought. Like iOS, it was designed as a mobile operating system from the beginning: first for smartphones, then later for tablet devices. Android is open source and Google releases the code under the Apache License. This open source code and permissive licensing allows the software to be freely modified and distributed by device manufacturers, wireless carriers, and even enthusiast developers. Literally anyone in the world can build a device that runs Android.

Because of this, when you're shopping for an Android device, the phrase "caveat emptor" applies. Some device manufacturers have built sub-standard Android-based tablets that will not give you the experience you'll need from a piece of hardware you use outside, every day. Generally speaking, decent Android tablets should start around $200 and go up in price from there. Whenever possible, try to stick with brand names you recognize: Samsung, LG, HTC, Acer, and ASUS to name a few. As an appraiser, you're used to questioning things that don't make sense and really digging in to get the details you need. If you don't recognize the brand, make sure you do your homework and read other customer reviews before purchasing.

Android appeals to the type of user that likes to customize their phone or tablet and have information fed to them in real-time as they're on the go. Because it's so configurable, you can adjust many more settings on Android than you can on iOS. This allows you to really mold your device to your own style, preference, or workflow.
Android™ (cont’d.)

However, this highly customizable nature of Android has created a number of different “flavors” of Android over the years, with many of the big manufacturers not only customizing the OS itself, but adding their own software on top of the operating system in an attempt to distinguish themselves from their competition. As a result, where Apple offers an identical experience on their phone and tablet devices, the Android experience can vary widely from phone to tablet devices, especially when you’re using devices built by different manufacturers. (For example, when you have a phone made by LG, and a tablet made by Samsung.)

That being said, some of the additional features and software that manufacturers add are a good thing. The S Pen feature on the Samsung “Note” devices is a good example. Those devices come with a stylus that allows you to write like you normally would on paper as a way to enter text or perform actions. This feature is excellent, and makes the Note 8.0 and Note 10.1 two very popular devices.

This fracturing of the overall experience when using Android is one of the primary reasons that Google introduced their Nexus line of products.
Android: Nexus (the pure Android experience)

Compatible a la mode software: TOTAL for Mobile, WinTOTAL for Mobile

- Samsung Galaxy Note 10.1 (2014 Edition): You can see Samsung’s multi-window tray on the left, their S Pen air command pad overlaying the home screen, and both their weather and S Note widget's pre-loaded on the home screen.

Google Nexus 7: No extraneous software

Nexus products are Google’s attempt to show us what their vision of a “pure” Android experience should be. They’re manufactured by hardware partners on Google’s behalf, but no modifications to the operating system are made and no additional software is added to the devices.

Nexus devices get a lot closer to the ubiquitous experience across devices that Apple has accomplished by keeping iOS exclusively to themselves. Users that have both a Nexus phone (like the Nexus 4 or new Nexus 5) and a Nexus tablet (Either the Nexus 7 or Nexus 10) will have a much more consistent experience between their devices.

I think of Google’s Nexus devices as a sort of “middle ground” between iOS and Android. They retain all the user configurability and customization that Android offers, while getting closer to the simplicity that Apple works so hard to focus on with their devices. If you’ve been considering a switch from Apple to Google, then a Nexus device might make a good transitional choice into the Android world.
Appraisers often ask us about Amazon’s Kindle Fire devices because of their low entry price and high quality hardware. The Fire uses a completely customized version of Google’s Android operating system, to the point that you can’t really even tell that it’s Android at all.

As such, it behaves in a completely different way than other Android tablets do, and has no similarity at all to other Android tablets or phones. Additionally, these modifications to the operating system include changes to how applications talk to each other, limiting them so that they can only talk to the operating system itself, but not directly to other applications as on iOS or other Android devices. This limitation makes it frustrating for appraisers who are trying to go fully mobile, as it’s difficult or impossible to access and edit your paperless workfile.

But, because the Kindle is still built on Android under the hood, it will run any Android app. Kindle devices use Amazon’s App Marketplace instead of Google Play, though, requiring app developers to post their app in more than one store. Most of the time this isn’t an issue. But be aware that not all app developers will post their app to Amazon’s store. This could mean that an app available on other Android devices is not available for the Kindle. Dropbox, for example, is available in the Google Play Store, but not in Amazon’s App Marketplace.
Windows 8 (and 8.1)

Compatible a la mode software: TOTAL, WinTOTAL Aurora

While Apple and Google have chosen to design special-purpose operating systems specifically for mobile devices, Microsoft has gone a different route, instead choosing to build onto their existing desktop operating system (Windows) by adding mobile components to it. The result is Windows 8.

The attraction of Windows is that it promises a single-device replacement for your current hardware that can be both productive in the office (multiple monitors, keyboard/mouse attachments, etc.) and in the field as your touch-enabled tablet.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Unfortunately, Windows 8 doesn’t really know who it is yet. On one hand, in the desktop environment it works and behaves in much the same way that previous versions of Windows did. You can run your traditional desktop/laptop software applications (such as TOTAL, Outlook, Internet Explorer, Word, Excel, etc.) and have all the power and flexibility you’ve come to expect from a desktop or laptop PC.

On the other hand, when you’re in the mobile portion of the operating system (The “Start Screen”, for lack of a better term; Microsoft hasn’t named this environment yet), you can only run apps specifically designed to be run in that mobile environment. Apps run in a true full-screen state, rather than windows like you’re used to seeing on the desktop, and there is an app store (The Microsoft Store) available to download and install apps from, much like you’ll find on iOS and Android.

Though we haven’t yet released a version of our TOTAL for Mobile app for Windows, you can still install and run either TOTAL or WinTOTAL Aurora on these devices. However, it’s important to understand that these traditional desktop applications haven’t been designed to be used on small-screen devices with touch as a primary input method.

Windows RT

To add to the confusion, Microsoft also offers a version of Windows 8 based on what they call Windows RT. This version of Windows is limited in that it can only run a handful of traditional desktop apps designated by Microsoft and the full-screen apps designed for the “Start Screen” mobile environment. As such, there is no software available from a la mode that can run on a
App availability

App availability is an area that a lot of people get hung up on unnecessarily. While it’s true that there are always going to be some fringe apps that are only available on one or the other platform, generally speaking, Android and iOS have app parity at this point — especially for all the main “top tier” apps that people are used to using today.

Here are a handful of tips about app availability to be aware of:

• a la mode offers mobile software in all the mobile app marketplaces with the exception of the Microsoft Store. That means you can find TOTAL for Mobile in:
  • The Apple App Store.
  • The Google Play Store.
  • The Amazon App Marketplace. *(coming soon)*

• Overall the Google Play and Apple App Stores offer generally the same options for apps. And, in fact, all of the apps that we use and recommend for appraisers as part of our mobile workshops are available from both of these vendors.

• The Amazon App Marketplace is separate from either Google’s or Apple’s stores, and does not offer as many apps overall as either of them. For example, while you can find an official Dropbox app in both Google’s and Apple’s stores, there is not one available for the Amazon Kindle Fire line of tablets.

• Microsoft’s store for their mobile apps offers the smallest selection of apps overall.
  • Note that a la mode does not offer a product in this marketplace.

• On a Windows device *(not Windows RT)*, visit www.alamode.com/myaccount to download and install TOTAL or WinTOTAL Aurora.
Hardware

Let’s get to the guts of it: hardware. We’ve spent a lot of time evaluating different devices, as well as talking with appraisers and other users like yourself to determine which hardware features are important to consider when picking a device to fit your workflow.

Understand that many of the items we’ll discuss next will be entirely subjective in their nature. For example, some people prefer smaller devices and screens, while others prefer larger. There is no “right” device that will work for everyone. You need to take the time to look at each of the devices you’re considering and do your homework.

Try to do the following for each device:

- **See it in person.** Make a trip to Best Buy, Costco, Walmart, or anywhere you can buy electronics. Try to put your hands on the device. What does it look like? How does it feel in your hand? Is it too heavy? Think about carrying it around for an extended period (because you will in the field). Will it fit in your purse/pocket/gear bag?

- **Read reviews.** Never trust the manufacturer to tell you if a device is right for you or good overall. Look it up. Talk to other peers that use similar devices, or seek out online reviews for the products you’re considering (Google it). Amazon.com and Newegg.com both offer customer reviews on every product they offer, and the information contained within those reviews will often answer some of the most common questions you may have.

- **Evaluate accessories.** Oftentimes looked over, the availability of accessories for a specific device may make or break your decision to purchase it. Is there a protective case available for the device you’re considering that meets your needs? Hand straps, moisture-proof cases, screen protectors, as well as chargers or accessories that make the device that much more useful overall.

But aside from the above, here are some specific things worth considering specifically for appraisers.

### Physical size and weight

First up: weight. And it’s an important one. Generally speaking, smaller devices weigh less, but there’s an obvious trade-off in screen real estate. While smaller devices might be easier to carry around (trust us, they are!), you’re going to have to work harder to see items on the screen depending on your eyesight.

Smaller devices are also easier to hold comfortably in one hand, making operation and software functions easier to manage. Plus, some device (like the Nexus 7 and even the iPad mini) may even fit in your pocket.
Screens

Every time we talk about devices with customers, invariably screen visibility and size come up. They’re a big part of what makes up one of these mobile devices, and it’s only natural that there would be questions about it. So, let’s talk through them.

Outdoor visibility

If you read or follow any type of technical details, blogs, or sites, repeatedly you’ll see terms describing the types of screens these different devices use: AMOLED, Super AMOLED, LCD, HD PureBlack, Ipswitch, etc.

Never fear. For the most part, the technology of the screen doesn’t really matter. What matters to most people is how it **looks** in its day-to-day use. Specifically, people want to know if this device or that device is more viewable outdoors.

**Bottom line: They’re all about the same, and none of them are very good.** Here, take a look at this photograph:

In that photo, all the devices are on with their screen brightness turned all the way up. They were taken in full sunlight, on a clear day, when the sun was generally pretty full. As you can see, they’re all pretty similar overall, with maybe the iPads and Kindle Fire edging out the other devices ever so slightly.

Overall, the best thing you can do is try to get your hands on one while you’re standing outside. That will give you the best evaluation of the screen on any particular device.
Outdoor visibility (cont’d.)

There are a couple of things you can do to improve the overall visibility of your device outdoors that are worth mentioning:

• If your device uses polarized glass (check the device specifications or Google it), then looking at the screen through polarized sunglasses while you’re outdoors will somewhat improve the visibility of your screen. All iPads, for example, use polarized glass.

• Get and apply an anti-glare screen protector/cover. These help to increase the contrast while also cutting down on the glare from direct outdoor light.

Size

Screens sizes fall into one of three categories:

• 5” – 6.5”: The “phablet” — devices in this size are going to be oversized phones.

• 6.5” – 8.5”: Small tablets

• 8.5” and up: Full-sized tablets

Smaller versus larger is purely personal preference. From a pragmatic standpoint however, most people find that sketching in the field on a mobile device doesn’t become truly practical until you get into at least the 6.0” range. But your mileage may vary.

“Phablets”, or phone-tablets, are attractive to a number of users because they accomplish everything in a single device. The biggest trade-off being a (sometimes much) smaller screen than separate dedicated tablets.

Smaller screens…

• …typically mean the device is cheaper because it is smaller overall.

• …are lighter, again, mostly because the entire device is smaller.

• …will often fit into your pants pocket (depending on your pants).

Larger screens…

• …are easier to see if you have eyesight/vision issues.

• …mean larger on-screen elements, making items easier to manipulate or use.
Moving on. Let’s talk about cameras, shall we?

Appraisers have unique requirements when it comes to cameras for their day-to-day work. How does your device perform when there’s no electricity at the REO you’re inspecting? What about that FHA head-and-shoulders requirement for the attic where there aren’t any lights or windows?

There are real-world problems we want to try and solve. And the reality is that, while cameras on mobile devices are getting better and better, there are still occasions today when having a good point-and-shoot camera as a backup just makes a lot of sense.

But, let’s talk first about evaluating the camera on your mobile device or the device you’re considering. Here are three important considerations many people make:

• **Does it have a flash?** A lot of people get hung up on this. The reality is that many tablets do not come with a flash built in. Who knows why. Don’t let that be a dealbreaker for you. In most cases, the flash provided on your phone or tablet isn’t great beyond a few feet anyway.

• **Megapixels.** It may seem obvious, but the greater the number of megapixels, the sharper the photo, right? Not necessarily — especially for appraisal work. Remember that your photos are going to be reduced in file size for placement on a low-resolution PDF, so it usually becomes impossible to tell the difference between a 2MP and 10MP photo in a delivered report. What you’re really looking for is a larger aperture, which leads us to:

• **F-stop.** This important number in photography refers to the size of the aperture of the included camera. Basically, it’s a measurement of the amount of light the camera can collect during a shot. Generally speaking, smaller f-stop numbers mean larger apertures. Larger apertures, in turn, mean that devices do better overall in lower lighting situations, even without a flash. Take the time to research this important number when considering a device.

So what do you do in those rare cases when you just absolutely can’t get a good shot from your mobile device? Two simple solutions we talk about at our Mobile Workshops are the Eye-Fi card that syncs with your mobile device, and the Galaxy Camera. These options offer you a more mobile device-friendly solution for these situations.

You can find more about these solutions online:

• **Eye-Fi card:** [http://www.eye.fi/products/mobi](http://www.eye.fi/products/mobi)

• **Galaxy Camera:** [http://www.samsung.com/in/promotions/galaxycamera/](http://www.samsung.com/in/promotions/galaxycamera/)
Capacity/Expandability

Every device you look at will offer you a range of capacity options when purchasing. Typical storage amounts will be 16GB, 32GB, and 64GB. The larger the number, the more data it will hold. For the most part though, if all you’re going to be using the device for is work (appraisal-related stuff), then the smallest capacity devices are usually more than enough.

However, many people want to use these devices not just for work, but for personal use as well. In that case, you might want to consider these other items:

- **What else are you going to use this device for?** If you’re going to want to store music, movies, games, pictures, etc., then you’ll want to consider a device with more storage.

- **Does the device offer expandable storage?** Many Android and Windows devices offer ways, either via USB or SD-type cards, to expand the storage beyond what the device offers on its own. This can be a handy feature if you change devices often, or want to upgrade later to a new device. You can store content on the card and simply move it over to your new device quickly and easily.

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**Note:** If all you’re going to use your tablet for is appraisal work, then even the smallest capacity devices at 8GB have more than enough storage than you’re likely to ever use.
WiFi-only vs. cellular connectivity

While TOTAL for Mobile doesn’t require an active Internet connection to gather data or sketch, connectivity to the Internet from your mobile device is important in order for you to sync content back and forth between your desktop and mobile device, as well as when you want to access information directly in the field. Whether or not you need access to that connection everywhere you go is entirely up to you. It’s really a matter of urgency. Knowing that you can drive around and find free WiFi available at every McDonalds, Starbucks, IHOP, Panera Bread, and other similar locations, many people can makedo without paying extra for full-time Internet access.

You really have two choices here:

WiFi-only devices

If you don’t think you’ll need access to the Internet 100% of the time, you may be able to makedo with a device that connects to the Internet via WiFi only. This means that in order to sync new content to or from your device, you’ll need to find a WiFi hotspot to connect. As mentioned above, they’re everywhere these days, often for free.

Alternatively, you could carry around a separate dedicated Internet hotspot device. It could be a separate device (like a MiFi) or a feature on your phone (personal hotspot). Check with your carrier for your options.

LTE/Cellular-enabled devices

From a simplicity standpoint, though, it’s tough to beat built-in cellular connectivity. Many of the tablet devices on the market today offer models that include this feature. Service is provided from a variety of providers, and your device then has full-time on-demand access to the Internet no matter where you are (provided you have cellular service, that is).

Anytime you provide your own Internet access (whether it’s a dedicated hotspot used with a WiFi-only tablet, or a tablet with built-in connectivity) you’re going to pay extra for it. Talk with your cellular provider about what your options are for connecting your device in the field.
Let's bottom line it.

Oftentimes we get asked what seem like simple questions. Questions like “Which device should I buy?” Or, “Which of these devices is better than the other?” But it’s never a simple answer. There are too many options, and too many different workflows. Take the information we’ve given you and make an educated decision the best you can.

That being said, here are some general tips we can give you to help narrow down your choices:

• **Do you have a smartphone today?** If so, and you’re comfortable with how it works, consider getting a mobile device powered by the same operating system. For example, if you have a Galaxy S4 as a phone, then a Galaxy Note tablet might be a good fit for you. Likewise, if you’re an iPhone user, then an iPad is almost assuredly a good choice. The benefits of sticking within the same platform are that you have instant familiarity with it, making learning the new device much simpler, and many times the monetary investment you’ve made into apps for your phone will simply carry over to your tablet at no extra cost.

• **Identify the size of device you want early.** This will greatly narrow down your list of devices to consider.

• **Steer away from manufacturer names you don’t know.** Remember: “caveat emptor.”

• **Look at available accessories once you think you’ve chosen a device.** You’re going to want to look at ways you can efficiently carry and protect your new device.

• **When in doubt, consider an iPad.** One of the big benefits Apple has is its simplified device lineup, as well as the overall simplicity of iOS (the software that runs Apple’s mobile devices). It’s hard to go wrong and pick a bad device, and you may find it easier to learn.
### Conclusion

Sometimes a chart or two helps. The information in this chart is valid for December 2013 products.

#### Device considerations

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<th>Kindle Fire HDX</th>
<th>Android</th>
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Syncing is not required
Conclusion (cont’d.)

This is just the beginning. After you’ve made your decisions and purchased your mobile device, here are some additional steps to consider:

• Check out our apps online for free: http://alashort.com/TOTALforMobile
• Sign up for one of our mobile workshops: http://workshops.alamode.com
• Follow our blog for more information: www.AppraiserTips.com

We hope that you’ve found the information contained in this buying guide helpful. Remember that we’re always standing by to help. You can reach out to us at MobileExperts@alamode.com with any questions you may have, or if you’ve got specific device questions you want help with.