

TECHNOLOGY

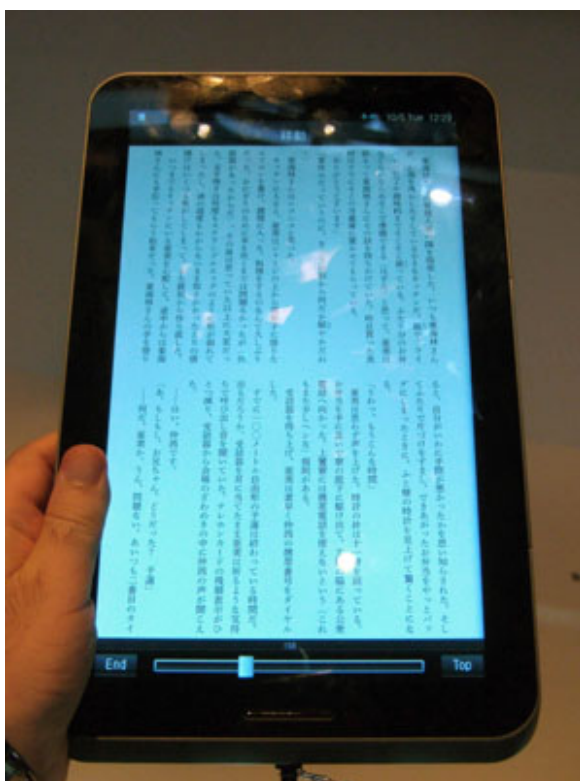
Unfortunately named Galapagos tablet is proud to be different

By WARREN FREY

Special to The Japan Times

A new tablet may be the last gasp of the Galapagos syndrome in Japan.

Apple's iPad, introduced earlier this year, is not only a smash hit, it has created a whole new consumer space for tablet computing. While competitors such as RIM and Samsung are feverishly working on rival tablets, at present the iPad has the sector all to itself, with even the traditionally closed Japanese market embracing Apple's "magical and revolutionary" device.



World of its own: Japan's techies have lamented the name of Sharp's new Galapagos tablet. RICK MARTIN PHOTO

Enter the Galapagos tablet from Sharp. The device, recently showcased at the CEATEC conference held at the Makuhari Messe convention center in Chiba, comes in 5.5-inch and 10.8-inch sizes, has onboard games and a custom social network, and has a Japanese-language e-book reader along with an online magazine and bookstore.

The Galapagos is aimed squarely at the Japanese market, starting with the title of the device, which (intentional or not) evokes the often used term for Japan's perceived societal and

technological isolationism.

It's a move that's puzzled tech experts such as Serkan Toto, mobile-industry consultant and Japan correspondent for technology website TechCrunch.

"I am not sure what came over Sharp's marketing department, and neither is the entire Japanese tech scene," Toto said. "Sharp says it used the term to reflect the changes that the constant evolution of technologies bring to users, but it's just a terrible branding decision — one of the silly mistakes big companies sometimes make."

The "Galapagos syndrome" refers to a phenomenon unique to Japanese culture and in particular its mobile space. Up until recently, the country's mobile industry relied entirely on domestic sales and ignored the international market, with mobile ads and content alone bringing in more than \$17 billion a year.

Strong, long-standing ties also exist between carriers and handset makers, so content had to be heavily localized. Japanese mobile users are also among the most demanding in the world, taking advanced cell phones and a wealth of mobile-specific content for granted, Toto said.

All of these factors have led to a silo mentality, with manufacturers able to comfortably ignore the rest of the world, just as the biology of the actual Galapagos Islands thrives in naturally imposed isolation. The introduction of the iPhone changed this situation. Apple's phone was already a smash hit across the globe; even Japan's entrenched players had to sit up and take notice once local users stampeded to Softbank stores to snap up the touch-enabled, app-stuffed smart phone.

"The iPhone basically caused an earthquake in Japan's mobile scene. It has better hardware, better software (apps), a better UI (touch-screen user interface) and was more user-friendly than most cell phones when it launched in Japan," Toto said.

The effects of the iPhone can already be felt throughout the industry, he added, with domestic handset shipments tumbling 12.3 percent year on year, leading to a 12-year low of 31 million units in fiscal 2009.

Though Android phones haven't yet captured the public imagination to the same extent as the iPhone, new models are on the way from KDDI's au service, and the Galapagos tablet is also based on the Android OS.

Sharp plans to market the Galapagos outside of Japan,

though the company will have to revamp the device in order to sell it in the United States and Europe, where it will be marketed as an e-book reader.

"The e-book/e-magazine store is heavily focused on Japan, meaning they would have to lose this feature for international markets or establish ties with foreign content providers," Toto said.

Japanese feature phones aren't going away anytime soon, and the Sharp tablet will also likely gain some traction among users who want a specific suite of apps finely tuned to their cultural radar. But the Galapagos faces stiff competition even in the domestic market.

"I think the iPhone has shown Japan that foreign makers can not only produce competitive but actually superior mobile hardware," Toto said. "Smart phones, the iPhone and Android are leveling the playing field. The population is shrinking and graying, and other nations such as Korea and China are catching up rapidly in the technology race and looking at (Japan as) their big neighboring market," Toto said.

Samsung's Galaxy Tab is one such Korean competitor that has already captured the imagination of not only CEATEC attendees, where it drew large crowds, but Japanese consumers as a whole.

"(Leading mobile operator) Samsung is perceived as an excellent brand in Japan, and the Tab is a good product. Plus, none other than DoCoMo is pushing it aggressively into the market," Toto said.

And the long-term outlook for companies that focus on the Japanese market exclusively?

"Galapagos is doomed," Toto said.

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