Review: Pricey iPad Mini Keeps Apple Premier Brand

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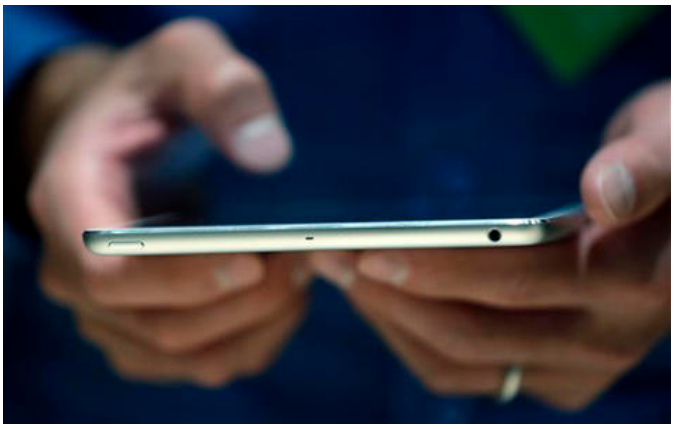

NEW YORK (AP) — Apple is probably one of the few companies that can pull off a price increase.

The new iPad Mini starts at $399, or $70 more than last year's model. For that price, you get a leap forward in power, speed, and display.

There are plenty of cheaper choices out there, including tablets for just $229 from Google and Amazon. None of them match Apple's iPads in app selection, design, and cachet.

Apple started selling the new iPad Mini on Tuesday, 11 days after the full-size iPad Air came out. The starting price of last year's Mini has been cut to $299. In both cases, versions with cellular access are available for $130 more.

In many ways, the old iPad Mini was a 2011 full-size iPad 2 in a smaller casing. The old Mini's display technology and its processor were already more than a year old when the device launched. It's even older now.

Apple doesn't skimp with the new model, which is officially called the iPad Mini with Retina display.

Retina is Apple's term for a higher-resolution screen — in this case, one that sports four times the pixels in the same space as the older version. According to Apple, there are enough pixels such that the eyes shouldn't be able to discern the individual dots that form text and images. You get much sharper images — even sharper than on the iPad Air, which has a resolution of 264 pixels per inch compared with 326 in the new Mini.

And while last year's iPad Mini used the same A5 processing chip as the 2011 iPad 2, this year's model shares the speedy, A7 chip found in the iPad Air as well as the new iPhone 5S. Apple says graphics are up to eight times faster than last year's

model and other tasks are up to four times as speedy. By contrast, the Air has only twice the speed as the previous full-size model.

Like the Air, the new Mini also has a second microphone for better audio recording and two Wi-Fi antennas for up to twice the speed.

In my tests, I found small text on websites much easier to read on the new Mini. White letters over a black background look faded on last year's Mini. They look clear and sharp on the new one. The differences are harder to glean with images and video. A blurry photo isn't going to look sharper just because there are more pixels. But at least it won't be surrounded by fuzzy captions.

As for speed, you won't notice much difference for everyday tasks. Apps do launch a tad faster on the new Mini, and Web pages load slightly faster. Where you'll notice the speed gains are in games and other data-intensive apps — many of which have yet to be written to fully take advantage of the A7 chip's power. As for the dual Wi-Fi antennas, I didn't find video downloads faster on the speedy Wi-Fi network at work, but I did see significant improvement when I tested the full-size devices on my irritable network at home.

Unfortunately, like the Air, the new Mini also lacks some features made possible by the A7 chip. That includes a fingerprint sensor for bypassing four-digit security codes and a camera that can take up to 10 photos per second. For now, that's found only in the iPhone 5S.

That's not a deal-breaker for me, though.

What might be is the price.

It's difficult to spend nearly twice more than Google's Nexus 7 or Amazon.com's 7-inch Kindle Fire HDX. Both are excellent tablets with a screen resolution that's about the same as the new iPad Mini. (Those two devices have fewer pixels, but also smaller screens, so their densities are comparable.)

The 7-inch screens, measured diagonally, aren't as large as the iPad Mini's 7.9 inches. You get about 35 percent more screen space on the Mini.

But the Nexus and Kindle devices are both lighter than the new iPad Mini, which got 7 percent heavier than last year's model because it has a larger battery to power the better display, while keeping battery life at 10 hours for Wi-Fi Web surfing. The new iPad mini is 11.7 ounces, compared with 10.9 ounces for last year's model, 10.7 ounces for the Kindle and 10.2 ounces for the Nexus.

The new Mini is also a tad thicker than last year's model, but slimmer than Google's and Amazon's tablets.

If you're watching your budget, consider those rivals or even the older Mini without the sharper display.

But if you're looking for a top-notch experience, you can't go wrong with the new Mini, even with the higher price tag.

Several leading apps come to Apple devices first, and they are more likely than Android apps to be adapted for tablet screens. With many Android apps, you simply get a blown-up version of the phone app. You'll appreciate using those apps on the new Mini's improved display.

In a sense, if price isn't an issue, the bigger question will be whether to pay $399 for the Mini or $499 for the Air, which has a 9.7-inch screen. Size is the main difference between the two models, whereas there were greater differences in display and speed last year. The new device has caught up to the point that it deserves to be called a Mini version of the full-size iPad.

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