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You Ask, I Answer: The Courtroom Tablet

May 21, 2015 | Jeff Taylor

This edition of You Ask, I Answer, comes from a question asked by California family law attorney, Ariel Leichter-Maroko. Ariel asks:

My firm is beginning a family law trial in a few weeks. There will be numerous exhibits, many of which are lengthy documents, so we would like to avoid using paper, and instead would like to have the exhibits displayed on tablets that we will provide to the judge and opposing counsel. Do you have any advice on which tablets to purchase?

Ariel goes on to detail some of his needs such as PDF, external storage, and faster processing speeds. Cost is definitely a consideration for Ariel, since his team is purchasing 7 for distribution to the judge, experts, and opposing counsel.

Without a doubt, the most embarrassing and frustrating experience is when technology doesn't function as it should. I've experienced technology fails on several occasions given my somewhat laissez-faire regard for presentation and technology. Be prepared to fail and have a backup solution available when you do.



No small task. Incidentally, Ariel's question is also similar to Mitch Jackson's on "the best" Android device for lawyers, so I suggested Ariel review that, too.

Cautions about technology in the courtroom

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Technology malfunctions are the primary reason I refuse to rely on technology in the courtroom. Before going live you must be certain you've accounted for every contingency and issue. And then triple check.

Assume "Jeffrey's Law of Legal Technology": Forget that the solution worked 100 times before, and even 5 seconds before, it's not going to work now.

Create a contingency plan. I'd also suggest that Ariel talk with the judge and opposing counsel to make sure they're comfortable with the method. Personally, I'd hate to have opposing counsel make a scene — a trial is a drama, after all — out of the fact he can't get the tablet to open the exhibit. (This is much less of a concern in bench trials than in jury trials. I don't know who Ariel's ultimately presenting to, but it's still a factor.)

User experience matters

In Ariel's case, he's going to be more concerned about user experience, than the fact he can't project an image onto the screen — although I bet he'll have some of that, too.

The number one reason more people own iPads over Android tablets is the user experience. Android tablets, especially most running Android 5.0, have a nasty habit of overpromising and underperforming. User experience is the reason I consume more information on my Android phone, as opposed to my Android tablets. Tablets aren't producing the crisp and clean experiences I get from my Android phone.

Get an iPad

In truth and honesty, my first recommendation to Ariel was to not dismiss an iPad as a prime option. I know, blasphemy. But iPads have two key factors that make them perfect for Ariel's project. An iPad consistently performs (including all of Ariel's desired tasks) and most users will be familiar with how an iPad operates and maneuvers. That's not necessarily a factor that comes standard with Android devices, since each manufacturer adds slight tweaks to their machine.

On the other hand, iPads and the iOS interface are pretty much ubiquitous, regardless of the platform. And I can guarantee that Madame Judge and Mr. Opposing Counsel are already using iPads — and probably religiously reading the iPhone J.D. blog, as opposed to this one — so Ariel will have fewer struggles helping those two navigate through the information.

Thus, if you're concerned about providing a "star studded" user experience in your trial, you must consider iOS.

There are plenty of Android options

But this wouldn't be much of an Android for lawyers blog, if it's author became an iOS shill. There are still plenty of options in the Android world for Ariel, and I suggested four. These are in order of preference, based on Ariel's needs.

I consider a number of different factors to develop my list of options. First, building on my user experience qualification, and my believe that bigger is better in this case, I prioritized larger-screen tablets over smaller screen tablets. Even though a 7-inch screen is perfect to hold in one's hand, Ariel is showcasing a number of documents — and given his family law focus, probably financial records — which deserve the best viewing experience. Zooming in to read information is simple enough, but doesn't provide a quality user experience. I prefer a full-screen display that is easy to read, with the option to zoom in to particular parts when I wish. Seven inch tablets just don't provide that experience.

The second factor I considered was Ariel's need to get information onto the device quickly and efficiently. A cloud solution — e.g. distribution from Google Drive — is an obvious choice, but WiFi is often spotty, at best, and downloads take time. I think Ariel's best served by purchasing SD cards to expand a device's internal storage, or using an USB adapter to quickly transfer the data. Thus, the devices for consideration need to have connectivity. (You might also check out this post on managing documents.)

Next, I considered performance, including processor time. Ariel tells me that he may have some documents that are hundreds of megabytes in size — a poor practice to start, but that's a different story; try splitting or compressing the PDF files in Acrobat — so he needs a device that can process and open the file quickly. In this case, I also suggest that Ariel use Adobe Acrobat Reader or Google PDF Viewer to open the files on each tablet — be sure to set the app as default to improve the user experience. Normally, ezPDF Reader (my review here) would be my go-to suggestion for editing and manipulating PDFs on Android. But since Ariel won't need users to annotate the exhibits, a viewer app will provide a better user experience.

Finally, I factored in the cost of the various tablets, since Ariel's buying seven for his trial. Of course, my advice is always, don't skimp on price. Cheap tablets produce cheap results, and also create poor user experiences. High-end tablets generally create a better user experience. High-end tablets also cost more money.

In the same sense, I considered that these tablets are almost disposable in nature, so if I could find a cheap one that could perform well, it'd be worth considering for this project.

Option 1: Samsung Galaxy Tab 4 10.1

The Samsung Galaxy Tab 4 10.1 fits all of the mentioned criteria. It's available for about \$279 (\$259 on Amazon in White), comes with 16gb of internal storage, and 1.5gb of RAM. The 1.2 GHz processor is a bit slower than I like, but it's plenty of power to accomplish what Ariel intends, without compromising performance. Best of all, the Galaxy Tab 4 has a microSD slot for expanding the memory to 64GB.

If I was Ariel, I'd buy 7 extra class 10, 32GB microSD cards, like this one, and preload all of my exhibits on each tablet. I can create a folder or shortcut on the homescreen to the files on the microSD card. I'd also opt for an SD card reader — don't forget the microSD adapter — to load exhibits onto the microSD card during trial, when needed.

The 10 inch screen means this is a very decent solution, with a lower-than-expected cost.

Option 2: Nexus 9

The Nexus 9 is the most expensive tablet I suggested (\$472 from Amazon), but a tablet that will provide a consistent, "pure Android" experience. The Nexus 9 is missing the microSD slot, but comes with 32 (or 16) GB of internal storage. This should be enough for Ariel, plus he can add or remove documents and apps, as he sees fit. This will free up even more space.

Android 5.0.1 is making the Nexus 9 a bit laggy, but Android 5.1.1 is rolling out. This update should fix some of the stability problems. The Nexus 9 will still function well even without the upgrade. Plus, if Ariel wanted to, he could "downgrade" to a more stable Android 4.4.

Option 3: Amazon Kindle Fire HDX 7

Normally, I wouldn't give an Amazon Android device a second glance. But the Amazon Kindle Fire HDX 7 satisfies a lot of Ariel's requirement, and is available for \$199 on Amazon.

Obviously, some of the biggest drawbacks are, 1) it's Amazon, which means Amazon Appstore for Android, and 2) the HDX is a 7-inch tablet. Acrobat Reader is available in the Appstore for Android, as a direct download.

The Kindle Fire HDX 7 sports a 2.2 GHz processor, making it one of the fastest devices on the market. Plus, you're getting a 323 ppi display, for high-quality image viewing. The true negative is the fact that there's only a 7-inch screen — an 8.9-inch HDX is available for \$479. If you're really concerned about user experience, stick to the larger screen devices listed above. If you want to test the experience, try getting your grandma to use the device and open the files. If she can do it, you should be fine.

Option 4: Samsung Galaxy Tab S 8.4

My final suggestion is the "toned down" version of the Tab 4, the Samsung Galaxy Tab S 8.4. This should probably move ahead of the Kindle Fire, and maybe Nexus 9, because of screen size and performance. The Tab S comes with an 8.4-inch screen and 16GB of ROM (expandable to 128GB). The 1.9 GHz processor is at the upper end of the spectrum, so there's no trouble handling any of the tasks. The Samsung Galaxy Tab S 8.4 will set you back \$279, and its big brother, the Galaxy Tab S 10.5 will bust your wallet at \$379. Compared to the Galaxy Tab 4 10.1, both of these devices fare much better in performance and other specs, but will break budget in mass quantity, which is why the Tab 4 gets the top spot nod.

Live the Boy Scout Motto, "Be Prepared"

Regardless of the selection of tablet for the purpose, the most important factor is readiness. Honestly, "a few weeks" is probably not enough time to work out kinks that could cripple the experience. (I'm certainly not saying Ariel's doing things wrong, just constricting the timeline for preparation.)

If you're implementing technology into the courtroom, you need to prepare from the beginning for its use, just as you do with your client's file. I think we do a disservice to our client's case if we "wing" our technology preparation, or delay its use until right before trial. Remember, "Jeffrey's Law of Legal Technology." Zealous advocacy on behalf of our clients includes diligence in preparing contingencies for the inevitable technological failure.

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