

Wearable tech gizmos tend to be geeky

by Jonathan Sidener

There was a time when the gadget world was abuzz with predictions that the age of wearable tech was just around the corner.

We would all soon accessorize with our cell phones, music players and cameras as they grew small enough to dangle on thin chains around our necks. We would have video displays in our glasses and wear little digital photo screens as jewelry.

Much of that is technically possible today, but hasn't really caught on.

The problems probably started with Bluetooth headsets for cell phones. They're dorky. Unfortunately, this truth isn't evident to everyone. Seemingly sensible people walk around wearing them. Of course, they're generally not people you would consider "fashionistas."

A widely circulated and humorous e-mail proposed several new words for the common lexicon, including: "Bluetoothsome, adj., used to describe someone so attractive that his/her hotness is not diminished by the wearing of a dorky Bluetooth earpiece."

Another Bluetooth device that could fail to achieve techno-coolness comes from Fossil and Sony Ericsson. It's a caller-ID watch. When your cell phone rings, you can look at your wrist to see whether it's worth digging your phone out of your pocket or purse.

Of course, if you're looking at your watch every two minutes in a business meeting or social setting, the boss, dinner date or mother-in-law may take it the wrong way. And, let's face it, "fashionistas" don't wear watches - especially young "fashionistas."

While many attempts have come up short on style, there's at least one piece of wearable hardware that many people find cool.

Sunglasses manufacturer Oakley has sold hundreds of thousands of its THUMP products, which have MP3 players incorporated into the frames of the polarized eyewear.

As a maker of premium sunglasses, Oakley knows something about style. Any pair of sunglasses with little stems and ear buds dangling from the frames is going to have a cyborg look to it. But Oakley found a way to avoid dorkiness.

In the original THUMP, Oakley embraced the Borg look. It was "gnarly" in both the original meaning - twisting and contoured - and as a superlative in surfer slang.

Flipping around the TV channels recently, I came across someone wearing either the original THUMP or the similar-looking O ROKR, another Oakley pair of sunglasses. But the O ROKR, developed with Motorola, is a cell-phone headset as well as a music player.

They were being worn by the gnarly (original meaning) Duane "Dog" Chapman, the flamboyant bounty hunter. The extreme style of the wearable gadget seemed to fit with the look the Dog was going for: a long mullet (the world's longest), razor stubble and shirtless except for an unbuttoned black leather vest.

While the original THUMP sold well, its look wasn't for everyone. As memory chips got smaller, Oakley was able to make the electronics fit more subtly into the frame. The THUMP 2, released in 2005, and the THUMP Pro, introduced in November, sported more subtle looks. Both models are a better fit for those of us who tend to wear shirts in public, or at least button our black leather vests.

Oakley sent a THUMP Pro to The San Diego Union-Tribune for review. In a highly unscientific survey of people around the office and bystanders at the dog park, the near-unanimous response was, "Cool." iPod owners tended to scoff at the 1-gigabyte maximum capacity, but the overall response was positive.

The first thing I noticed when I listened to music on the THUMP was the sense of untethered freedom. It was music to my ears without wires from ear buds or headphones.

Speaking of ear buds, there was no need to shove little speakers in my ear canal. The THUMP's jointed speaker booms adjust to hold the earpiece in place without a friction fit, without any worries that it would fall out. And it sounded really good.

The latest version includes USB 2, for faster uploading of songs to the glasses. It's also sweat-resistant.

Like Oakley's sunglasses, the THUMP Pro isn't priced to appeal to the frugal among us, although the price has come down significantly. The 1-gigabyte Pro costs \$349, down from \$449 for the similar THUMP 2.

The 512-megabyte Pro models cost \$299, while the 256-megabyte model costs \$249.

Oakley says the 1-gigabyte model holds more than 240 songs, but that depends on how long the songs are and how tightly you want to compress them.

The company won't say how many of the THUMP products have sold since their introduction in fall 2004. It's always dangerous when journalists do math, especially with the incomplete information found in the company's quarterly earnings statements, but it's my educated guess that Oakley has sold 300,000 to 400,000 of its electronic-fortified shades.

That pales compared to the 89 million iPods sold since 2001. But it qualifies as the first blockbuster wearable gadget.

It remains to be seen whether other wearable technology will duplicate the THUMP's success. But the Internet holds a hint that the winds might be shifting. A search for "MP3 sunglasses" turns up unabashed knockoffs of the THUMPs, at lower prices, of course.

Imitation - in this case eyewear a colleague refers to as Foakleys or faux Oakleys - is a pretty good indication of trendiness.

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