

High-tech reaches a new age of style

Paul Taylor

When Henry Ford began mass producing the Model T Ford he famously said "the customer can have any colour he wants, so long as it's black".

In the early days of personal computing and mobile phones, manufacturers, including Apple, IBM and Motorola adopted similarly inflexible policies. They believed, perhaps, that the new technologies were exciting enough to sell themselves. It is only in the last few years that most PC and mobile phone makers have broken out of the design straitjacket and begun to pay attention to consumer fashions and trends.

Nadine Kano, marketing director for experience computing at Microsoft, says in a recent paper – Fashion meets technology: welcome to the future of PCs – that: "Product differentiation in the PC industry is getting harder and harder to achieve based on technical specs. People have always wanted power, speed and reliability, but these days they can get comparable disk space, processor speed, and Ram (random access memory) from many PC manufacturers. To get something unique, people are now looking for style."

Forrester Research, the US-based market research firm, predicts that between now and 2012 will be the "Age of Style" for the consumer PC industry, with manufacturers weaving design considerations into every aspect of their business, including research and development, brand management, marketing and retailing.

"Fashion is how we express our identities," says Ms Kano. "Style is everywhere today ... The shift we're seeing in consumer PCs is just as inevitable." In addition to a variety of colour choices, from pink to brown and every hue in between, PCs are coming in a variety of materials, textures, shapes, sizes and form factors. And matching accessories, such as mice, carrying cases and music players, are becoming standard. "People are willing to pay more for a product that expresses their personal style," says Ms Kano.

Customers for some of Dell Computer's Inspiron performance laptops can now choose from up to 12 colours while Hewlett-Packard Pavilion laptops feature a subtle swirly pattern that would not look out of place on a surfboard. HP dubs the design its "radiance" imprint.

But Ms Kano cautions that "painting a PC a different colour is a superficial interpretation of fashion ... Fashion is about lifestyle as well as aesthetics."

Indeed, some laptop makers have gone further by experimenting with new materials. Asus, the Taiwan PC maker, recently unveiled a notebook PC in a bamboo case and has a best-selling line of laptops bearing the Lamborghini brand name with metallic-yellow cases and dark-leather palm rests. When you fire up the Asus Lamborghini VX3, it purrs like its automotive namesake.

Similarly Canon, the Japanese electronics and digital photography company, offers its PowerShot SD1100 IS camera in five metallic finishes, with names such as "rhythm and blue" and "Bohemian brown".

"We consider fashion to be important for general consumers who will be carrying or wearing the camera in their everyday lives," says Canon. Its designers make observations in their own lives, and then make predictions based on active trend surveys and user observations.

"Previously, black and silver dominated the camera market – however, due to the recent expanding base of users and the diversification of tastes, there has been an increase in bright colour variations," says Canon.

Other personal technology manufacturers have also hitched their wagon to fashion brands, while handset manufacturers, such as Korea's LG Electronics and Samsung, have scored big with phones bearing names such as Prada and Armani respectively (see below). "The Prada

phone has been very successful for us, particularly in Europe," says Jeff Hwang, president of LG Electronics Mobilecomm. As mobile phone penetration has edged towards – and in some cases passed – 100 per cent, handset makers have begun to emphasise design, styling and marketing.

"Phones are very individual, personal items," says Bill Ogle, Samsung's US marketing manager. "The phone you carry says a lot about you."

Younghee Lee, who worked at French cosmetics maker L'Oréal for a decade before joining Samsung as vice-president of marketing in July, agrees. Ms Lee, Samsung's first female vice-president, says her job is to orient Samsung more closely around customer needs. "Design is the DNA of mobile, it is the essence of the business," she says.

Even Bluetooth wireless headset manufacturers have caught the fashion bug. Plantronics, the leading US headset maker, chose the catwalk in Bryant Park, Manhattan, during the Spring 2008 New York fashion week to launch its new Discovery 925 headsets. In addition to "onyx black", Plantronics is offering the sleek, lightweight headset in "alchemy gold" and "cerise pink", the latter a colour designed specifically to appeal to women. Other companies have also noticed the importance of women regarding purchasing decisions about consumer electronics, particularly flat-screen televisions, and this is reflected in their design.

Samsung has introduced a line of liquid crystal display televisions with a colourful accent along the edge of the panel, called TOC – touch of colour – "for a look that's a slight departure from the all-glossy-black look of 2007".

Samsung and other consumer electronics manufacturers have realised they can charge premium prices for products that marry the best of technology with sharp designs – a concept Apple, the technology style leader, mastered in the 1990s, thanks in part to Englishman Jonathan Ive, head Apple's industrial design team. Mr Ive is renowned as the principal designer of the iMac, the iPod portable digital music player and iPhone smartphone. The iMac helped launch a revolution in PC design. Instead of a square beige case, the all-in-one egg-shaped iMac was made of translucent "Bondi blue" plastic and built around a 15in monitor.

But Apple's preoccupation with minimalist design – or, as some claim, form over function – has occasionally drawn criticism. The iPhone's recessed headphone jack ensures the handset's smooth contours are maintained, but forces owners to buy an adapter to use the most popular earbuds with the product. Similarly, Apple's new MacBook Air may be one of the lightest, slimmest laptops on the market, but the lack of a built-in ethernet port means users must plug in a USB connector to hook it up to a wired network. Apple is gambling that the new breed of technology fashionistas will be willing to put up with such inconveniences.

In the meantime, Apple's designs will no doubt continue to push the design boundaries and, where Apple goes, other manufacturers will almost certainly follow. For consumers, unlike Model T buyers, that translates into more choice.

How fashion has embraced the cellular phone revolution

Just as technology manufacturers have realised the benefits of adding a fashionable dimension to products, so fashion has also embraced technology, writes Vanessa Friedman.

After watches, costume jewellery and wellies, the latest trend in product diversification is the cellular phone.

Nokia started it with the launch of its "fashion" line of phones, a designer group of handsets in bright colours and patterns that changed with the seasons. But other designers soon saw opportunities, with Dolce & Gabbana teaming up with Motorola in 2006 to create a blingy gold Razr, Prada following with a super-slick, touch-screen LG in early 2007 and Giorgio Armani and Samsung launching a sleekly understated, credit card-sized number at Christmas.

Meanwhile, Samsung has also worked with Ted Baker, Anna Sui and Diane von Furstenberg, while Sony Ericsson entered the market with a limited edition Julien Macdonald number.

The reason why fashion has jumped on the phone bandwagon is simple: the age of the "It" bag is drawing to a close, with a recent forecast from market researcher Mintel predicting that luxury handbag sales, which grew 30 per cent year-on-year for the past three years, will slow significantly. Brands are hoping the era of the "It" phone will begin.

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