

Out with the phone, in with the watch

BARCELONA, SPAIN: After the smartphone, the intelligent watch promises to become the latest hi-tech trend, allowing wearers to peek at messages and even take calls without touching their phones.



As speculation grows that Apple may be working on an iWatch, other companies at the world's biggest mobile fair in Barcelona, including Japanese giant Sony, are already fighting for a place on customers' wrists.

Their target market is the person who's always glued to their smartphone, even in meetings or at the movies, or people who wish to monitor their heartbeat during exercise.

"The future in general is wearable devices," said Massimiliano Bertolini, chief executive of Italian firm i'm, as he showed off his flagship product, i'm Watch, at the industry event.

Available since 2011 in several European countries including Britain and Poland, it will go on sale in Spain's Corte Ingles department stores from next week, and could roll out with French retailers as soon as April, he said.

The smartwatch is an accessory to the smartphone, with which it communicates via Bluetooth.

It means you can leave your phone in your pocket as you answer or reject a call, read emails or updates from friends on Twitter or Facebook.

The i'm Watch features its own applications, too, such as i'm Sport, which links with a heart rate detector to allow a jogger to check his pulse.

"Such functions already exist in specialised sports watches but not on watches that are linked to smartphones," Bertolini said.

With a square aluminium frame, a 3.8cm touch screen and a strap available in various colours, the watch has already

found 30 000 buyers, 80% of them men aged mostly between 25 and 50.

"About 70% are iPhone users, 25% Samsung and the rest are other telephones using Google's Android operating system," he said.

The company aims to sell more than 200,000 watches in 2013, notably by targeting women with campaigns emphasising design rather than technology.

Italian-made, the basic model sells for a €390 although prices climb to €16,000 for a luxury version in silver or encrusted with diamonds.

That leaves plenty of room in the market for competitors such as Sony's SmartWatch, a square, Android compatible rival for your wrist that sells for about €130 or the US\$150 Pebble, a rectangular, Android- and iOS-compatible watch made by Pebble, which raised US\$10m in three weeks on "crowd-funding" site Kickstarter to develop the product.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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