Smart Watches Gain Interest and Popularity

MARTHA MENDOZA, Associated Press

PALO ALTO, Calif. (AP) — On a sunny day at a picnic table in Silicon Valley, Eric Migicovsky glanced down at his wristwatch. He wasn't checking the time, he was checking his email. Glancing up, he grinned.

The message was from yet another journalist.

In this corner of a world obsessed with the latest tech gadget, Migicovsky is this week's hotshot as his start-up company rolls out its new, high-tech Pebble smart watches. The $150, postage stamp-sized computer on a band is tethered wirelessly to a wearer's Android or iPhone.

With hands truly free, wearers can also read texts, see who is calling them, scan Twitter or Facebook feeds and yes, check the time, while digging in their garden, barbequing a steak or — as he was doing when he conceived of the idea — riding a bike when his phone began to ring.

And that's just the first version. Apps are being developed that could eventually bring everything from Angry Birds to eBay bidding onto our wrists.

"I like it when I'm running," says Migicovsky, "I like it on the subway, on an airplane, anytime I want to see what's on my phone without pulling it out of my pocket."

Pebble, which began shipping in January, is not the first to make a play for the watch market, which dwindled when consumers added smartphones to their purses and pockets. But this little firm of 11 is the most popular in the smart watch sector today, bubbling up amid rampant rumors that Apple has its own iWatch in the works.

Apple spokeswoman Natalie Harrison declined to comment, but it wasn't the first time she'd been asked. Apple has several patents for high-tech watches.

Tim Bajarin, a Creative Strategies analyst who's followed Apple for more than three decades, said he's been waiting for an iWatch ever since the company introduced a tiny Nano in 2010 and consumers began strapping them to their wrists.

"I do believe that Apple could potentially disrupt the watch market if they took their innovative design and tied it to their smartphones and ecosystems," he said. "We have no knowledge that they are doing this, but the area is ripe for innovation."

Meanwhile, Bajarin has one of the first 6,000 Pebbles shipped out so far, and he was gushing over it.

"I love it," he said. "I have four or five people who message me consistently, mostly my wife. In the past, I was always being forced to look at the face of my smartphone to see who it was, now I just glance at my wrist."

The next step? He wants a "Dick Tracy watch" that he could verbally order around, instead of pushing buttons.

Even without Apple, Pebble already faces serious competition with a handful of other smart watches.

The Cookoo, selling for $130, has a battery that lasts a year, compared to Pebble's once-a-week charge. The Sony SmartWatch, at $129.98, has a touchscreen, Motorola's $149 MOTOACTV includes a heart rate monitor and MetaWatch's $299 STRATA has a more feminine design.

These newly emerging devices are innovative not only for what they do, but also for how they were funded.

Last April, after failing to convince venture capitalists to fund Pebble, Migicovsky pitched it on Kickstarter, a website where any Internet user can support a project. He asked for $100,000. He got $10.3 million before capping his request. Supporters who spent $115 were promised a watch, which means Pebble has already sold about 85,000 watches. Cookoo and STRATA also turned to Kickstarter for start-up funding.

Michael Gartenberg, research director for technology research firm Gartner Inc.,

warned all of these start-ups face major challenges.

"There's been a lot of failed efforts to create smart watches and the key will be for vendors to understand the watch isn't just another digital device," he said. "Consumers wear watches for many reasons that have nothing to do with telling time, as evidenced by watch companies such as Rolex."

Gartenberg said that so far, none of the smart watches are really designed for the mass market. "The real question is will Apple or Google get into this space?" he asked, noting that Microsoft tried some years ago with their failed SPOT watches.

Any new device, even a watch, also raises regulatory questions. Are they safe to use on airplanes? Could they interfere with other devices? California Highway Patrol spokeswoman Erin Komatsubara said drivers are allowed to glance at a smart watch but it's not recommended to try to read anything at all while driving.

"It's considered a distraction," she said. "Two eyes on the road, two hands on the wheel, that's what we really, really want."

Manuel Yazijian, president of The American Watchmakers-Clockmakers Institute, said mechanical watches have a mystique of their own. But he said watchmakers may eventually turn their focus, attention to detail and ability to work on small items to smart watches.

"It's a different ballgame. I just don't know if they'll need maintenance and repair yet," he said. "Time will tell, no pun intended."

And the app Yazijian would like to see? "Our industry likes the old school mechanical stuff that ticks, like a heartbeat, like a live animal on your wrist," he said. "It would be so cool if the smart watch could make a ticking sound, right?"

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