

A sugar-cube-sized competitor to iPod

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It's said that in electronics, smaller is always better. If that's the case, the iPod may have found a challenger for portable music-playing supremacy.

Apple's wildly successful iPod MP3 player announced that it recently shipped its 30 millionth unit since the first iPod was sold in November 2001. In the three-month period ending Sept. 30, Apple reported selling 6.45 million iPods. The recent addition of the super-slim iPod Nano and the video-capable fifth generation iPod are expected to be among the top sellers during the holiday shopping season.

Enter the mobiBLU.

While Japanese-based mobiBLU can't match iPod sales, it has upended Apple in the battle to produce the smallest MP3 player. The DAH-1500i, nicknamed "The Cube," is less than 1 cubic inch and weighs 0.6 oz.

The smallest Apple product, the iPod Shuffle, is a stick-shaped player about 3 inches in length and weighs 0.78 oz.

Just like the iPod Shuffle, the Cube comes in 512KB and 1GB editions, which respectively add up to about 120 and 240 songs. Both use flash memory rather than a hard drive, which allows for a smaller product.

In August, PC Magazine's Web site called the Cube "the smallest, most impressively full-featured flash player we've seen yet."

The Cube features an FM radio receiver and voice-recording capabilities, can be used as a portable USB drive and comes in six colors. It has no ports other than the headphone jack, which is used to connect to computers and to charge the battery as well as to listen (the flip side is that one can't listen to the Cube while charging it).

The battery life is 8-10 hours, falling short of the iPod Shuffle's 12-hour capability.

"We compete head-on with the iPod Shuffle," said Bob Fullerton, director of product marketing for mobiBLU's parent company, Hyun Won Inc., "and many reviewers give the Cube a better recommendation than the Shuffle for our added features."

"We are the same price as the Shuffle and we have more features," Fullerton added.

Apple charges \$99 for the 512KB Shuffle and \$129 for the 1GB model. The Cube's prices are identical.

The Cube uses an Organic LED display, which creates a soft blue lighting and places little strain on the battery. The Shuffle does not have a display. The smallest iPod to feature a display is the 2GB Nano, which boasts a 1.5-inch full-color display and the ability to view photos. That iPod costs \$199 (the 4GB Nano goes for \$249).

Right now, mobiBLU products are only available in America via Wal-Mart's Web site. The company markets several other MP3 players and accessories, but The Cube is its most popular product both in the United States and the rest of the world, according to Fullerton.

"The Cube is popular because of its unique form factor," Fullerton said, "and it's also very rugged due to its aluminum housing.

"The Cube is tiny, but it has all the power features of the larger players from the competition," Fullerton said.

Fullerton added that mobiBLU is looking at ways to increase the memory of the Cube while maintaining its size.

"When we designed the Cube, we could only put 1GB max inside," he said. "There are new flash memory chips out now that would enable us to go 2GB in future product variations, keeping the same form factor we have now."

Apple stock rose to an all-time high Monday after analysts raised their expectations on how many iPods will be sold this quarter. J.P. Morgan analyst Bill Shope said Apple would sell more than 10.8 million iPods, and Chris Whitmore of Deutsche Bank said he expected 9.5 to 11 million to be sold.

Shares of Apple were trading at \$69.87 in late-day action Thursday, slightly down from their Monday high of \$71.07.

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