

Tech File: NXT plc makes audio waves

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UPI recently caught up with Graham Ryan, chief commercial officer of NXT plc, a publicly listed company on the London stock exchange. For those who don't know, NXT is a provider of unique sound solutions, best known for its flat-panel loudspeaker technology, which is then licensed and used in a broad spectrum of audio technologies for everything from flat-panel speakers to television and cell-phone audio. It's likely that most consumers have encountered their audio solutions somewhere.

Q. What is the history of NXT? How was it founded?

A. The heritage of the company rests firmly in the British Hi-Fi industry, where the group was formerly owner of famous brands such Wharfedale, Mission and Quad. A passion for inventiveness in the sound domain is deep in our roots, and this passion continues to drive us today, even though the scope of our inventiveness has changed dramatically in the last 10 years.

Q. What is it like being a parts provider for other corporate brands?

A. We license our technology to others, and, as such, do not have a typical vendor relationship with clients. Instead, we have a very clear vision to deliver relevant and compelling differentiation. Working with clients to break new ground together is at the core of our activities. This makes every relationship, as well as application, unique.

We are therefore delighted when we get the chance to act as a significant catalyst for sustainable differentiation in our clients' brands. You can see

many examples of these client relationships on our Web site. For our current diminutive size, we are extremely proud to work with extremely large global brands such as 3M, Toyota, Logitech, Kensington, Philips, NEC, LG, Toshiba and many others.

Q. Has NXT ever considered branching out and branding your own speaker technology?

A. If you go back in our history, you'll see that the group was the former owner of several brands in the British Hi-Fi industry. Shortly after discovering and developing the core foundations of DML some 12 years ago, management at that time considered that the greatest potential for the technology could be realized through licensing and partnership with other client brands across multiple industries, rather than limiting it to our own brands. We remain committed to that vision.

Q. Why do you think iPod accessories are so popular?

A. Apple has succeeded in delivering such an elegant solution with iPod and iTunes, as well as reaching deep into the psyche of the consumer. Apple has also succeeded in dramatically changing the way we "consume" music at home as well as on the move. iPod accessories therefore fulfill rational as well as emotional needs. We are proud to have worked with Kensington to help them develop an exciting new docking station, the SX2000 speaker system. We believe that the potential for further accessories is enormous and that NXT loudspeaker technology can provide unique solutions to our clients to help them deliver portable as well as home audio products. Although currently in development, you will see very exciting new client products come to market soon that allow consumers to share their music while on the move, in a convenient and compelling fashion.

Q. Can you describe the nature of your deal with Toyota?

A. Our relationship with Toyota and their audio solutions provider Fujitsu Ten stretches back at least five years. Both of these companies saw the opportunity to take sound where it has never been before in an automobile.

By transforming the headliner of the car into complementary speakers, they improve sound quality through a raised sound stage in the car, while keeping weight and intrusion into the cockpit to a minimum. Toyota has been so delighted with the results that they focused their TV and print advertising in Japan on this unique feature. The Estima model in Japan is now the second-fastest-selling car in the entire market with strong consumer preference. The American Toyota FJ Cruiser model just started shipping about eight weeks ago. We understand that consumer demand is currently outstripping supply.

Q. Why has it taken so long for flat-panel technology to get incorporated into automobiles?

A. The development cycle for cars is very long and the test methods for new technologies very stringent. We are therefore delighted to see Toyota be the first global brand to endorse our technology with significant models introduced in both American as well as their domestic Japanese market.

Q. Dolby digital and 5.1 is popular in high-end brands, but it still hasn't really filtered down to the average consumer. Why do you think that is?

A. Dolby continues to be an iconic brand in the world of sound and entertainment. It is not our place to comment on their strategy, but we assume that they continue to innovate in bringing cinematic experience to consumers in different ways as markets evolve. We certainly see dramatic changes in the home cinema market in the next few years as consumers are tempted to try to enjoy a movie experience without

necessarily wishing to fill a room with speakers and cables.

One of our longstanding clients, KEF, introduced a compelling surround-sound solution in recent times. Thanks to NXT technology it delivers surround sound with only two satellites and a subwoofer (kefinstanttheatre.com)

Although the 5.1 format continues to appeal to the audiophile, we are sure that there is tremendous potential to appeal to the mass market with smaller footprints and greater simplicity.

Q. What do you think is the next big breakthrough in sound technology?

A. We were delighted to announce and demonstrate our new Balanced Mode Radiator (BMR) technology at CES last January. Response at the show and since then has been tremendous. BMR delivers full bandwidth and wide directivity from a single drive unit. Fuller details on BMR technology can be found on our Web site under the technologies section. We see the application opportunities for BMR running across multiple markets, since it is scalable and can also be designed as both a circular as well as rectangular drive unit. We certainly see it with potential to enter Hi-Fi, flat TV and automobile. The technology has been reviewed very positively by the British Hi-Fi press, where Paul Messenger said "BMR has the potential to turn the world of Hi-Fi speakers on its head". We are still in the process of development and commercialization, but we hope to announce products with this technology later this year.

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