

Connected watches, virtually absent but still creating buzz at Baselworld

March 30 2014, by Nathalie Olof-Ors

Watches that connect to your smartphone or even a satellite to ensure perfect time, regardless of where you are in the world, or alert you if you leave your phone behind?

Although not on prominent display they were a hot topic of discussion this past week at Baselworld, the world's largest [watch](#) and jewellery fair.

The show in the northern Swiss city was yet again dominated by intricate mechanical watches, symbolising centuries of tradition, and jewel-covered timepieces showcasing the luxury and glamour that never seem to go out of fashion.

But there were a few new offerings for the tech-hungry crowd still waiting eagerly for their wristband to catch up with their phone or tablet.

Japan's Casio had two new high-tech models on display both set for release later this year.

Its new Bluetooth controlled Edifice watch connects to smartphones, allowing it to adjust to time changes as smoothly as the device in your back pocket, while its new G-Shock model can synchronise with precise time signals broadcasted by radio stations or satellites.

"We expect huge demand, because people nowadays look for this technology more and more, so we are very confident," Harald Schroeder, head of marketing at Casio Europe, told AFP.

He stressed the popularity of a range of brightly-coloured plastic G-Shock watches already available, which can control your smartphone's alarm and music functions, let you know when your phone is ringing in silent mode and vibrate if you leave your phone behind.

Several other Asian tech giants, including South Korean Samsung, Japan's Sony and China's Huawei, have also unveiled new connected timepieces in recent months.

Swiss watchmakers are following the developments closely, but appear reluctant to move down the same route, sticking instead to the tradition and skilled craftsmanship that have won them customers for centuries.

"Technically, there are lots of things that are possible," pointed out Marc Hayek, who heads Swatch Group's luxury watch brands Breguet, Blancpain and Jaquet Droz.

"But it's not just because something is possible that the market will automatically be there," he said, insisting that a watch should not seek to simply emulate the functions already available in phones and other wireless devices.

'Don't see big market'

"If it's less comfortable to use ... (and) if it's the same function, I think it will only mean disadvantages, and I really don't see a big market for that," he told AFP, stressing that watchmakers should instead reflect on "useful" and "intelligent" new functions.

Stephane Linder, head of Tag Heuer, the top watch brand in French luxury group LVMH's stable, agreed, pointing out that a connected watch would necessarily be more difficult to use than existing devices.

"With a telephone, I have a large screen, but with a watch, it's tiny," he pointed out.

Linder insisted though on the need to keep a close eye on developments, pointing out that technology has the power to suddenly reshuffle the deck, as Apple did when it dethroned the reigning mobile phone companies with its iPhone.

Watchmakers must remain ready to jump into the "smart watch" fray once they see the potential to bring true benefits to users.

If that happens "you will see developments in the luxury segment as well," he predicted.

Patek Philippe chief Thierry Stern said he was not worried by the smart watch hype.

"We saw the same thing when the iPhone was launched. People said it would spell the end of watches, but today watch sales are doing very well," he told AFP.

Connected watches were not a threat to the market for prestige timepieces, he insisted, pointing out that such tech objects "generally are obsolete after a year, because there is always a new version available."

"These are not objects that you keep as a watch," he said.

In fact, Martijn van Willegen, a Dutch jeweller who each year places around 80 percent of his annual watch orders at Baselworld, said he saw watches moving in the opposite direction of the phone tech drive.

Fifteen years ago, people mainly wanted super precise quartz watches that you could simply replace if it stopped working, he said.

"Today, we're back to old school 16th and 17th century mechanics that really make your heart beat faster... I love that."

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Citation: Connected watches, virtually absent but still creating buzz at Baselworld (2014, March 30) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-virtually-absent-baselworld.html>

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