

Snapchat's playful shot at sunglasses

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Snap Inc. shows their new Spectacles video-catching sunglasses

A paparazzi photograph of Snapchat Chief Executive Evan Spiegel prematurely revealed the Los Angeles company's first piece of consumer electronics: a pair of video camera sunglasses.

Though it spoiled the surprise delivered last week, the fact that Spiegel felt comfortable wearing the shades where he did - in public with his supermodel fiancée a month ago - suggests the gadget may succeed where similar products from rivals fell short.

Google, Facebook and others that have released head-mounted technology have presumed their tools would get people to significantly adjust their behavior. With a product that looks like ordinary sunglasses with some odd decoration on the hinges, Snapchat is going for a softer nudge. It's encouraging people to try a familiar-looking product to experiment with a new way of taking videos.

Spiegel may have a plan for smartglasses as sophisticated as Google Glass or Facebook's Oculus Rift, but he's starting off with a goofy name, one feature, an on-trend look, a lower price and no public goal of doing anything more than helping people preserve memories.

If he's right, Snapchat Spectacles could become the first piece of high-tech headgear that people want to wear and feel comfortable being around.

Spectacles integrates a small video camera and a notification light in the corners where lenses meet hinges. The camera wirelessly transmits 10-second clips to Snapchat's image-sharing app, one of the world's most popular mobile services.

Though they don't facilitate selfies, Spectacles captures wide-angle circular video, enabling viewers to rotate their mobile devices to see more of a scene than a smartphone video does. The sunglasses will cost \$130 when they launch this fall.

"What if you could go back and see that memory the way you experienced it?" Snapchat said in a blog post Saturday. "That's why we built Spectacles."

A bare-chested Spiegel wore them on the beach in Corsica, legs dipped in the water, as he embraced fiancée Miranda Kerr. The scene exemplifies how Spiegel envisions the new gadget to be used. The device

is a toy, he told the Wall Street Journal magazine, meant to be worn for fun at friendly events like barbecues or while on a hike.

Snapchat's first entry into electronics immediately drew comparisons to Google Glass, the augmented reality device with a wire-thin frame and a cube-shaped, see-through display. Google envisioned Glass as a smartphone replacement designed for all-day wearing, with text messages appearing on the screen and replies sent by voice command.

But the search and advertising giant pulled back from the hardware early last year after consumers voiced privacy concerns about the eyewear's camera and lacked enthusiasm about the design.

Spiegel's description of Spectacles as a more limited device with far less functionality sets lower expectations. Compared with Google's experience, that could provide a smoother path to mass adoption for Snapchat, which is reorganizing under the corporate title Snap Inc.

The name change spotlights Snap's desire to reinvent the camera. But avoiding bold statements about Spectacles gives the company room to learn and adapt, said Stephanie Trunzo, chief operations officer and chief digital officer at PointSource, a product design and development consultant.

"They are putting their toe in the water without carrying the weight of enormous promises that they might not be able to follow through on," she said.

Many of the societal questions Glass raised remain unanswered. But the teenagers and young adults who make up most of Snapchat's users may skip past those concerns quickly for a product tied to a brand they cherish. More than 150 million people use Snapchat each day for about 30 minutes on average.

Teens are focused on "fun and social interactions" and worry less about privacy, said Patrick Worfolk, senior vice president and chief technology officer at touch screen technology supplier Synaptics.

Spectacles provides a natural way to take a video without having a smartphone separate videographers from subjects. The one-size-fits-all sunglasses also come in several colors and don't look all that different from Ray-Bans or Warby Parkers.

"Snap Inc. is a company equally, if not more interested in understanding cultural forces than specific technologies," Andrew Edman, co-founder of Clear Design Lab, wrote in a blog post Monday. "Their hardware enables the culture, not the other way around. This is an incredibly rare thing for tech companies to understand and truly prioritize."

Google promoted Glass mainly to techies, asking people to write essays about how they would integrate it into their lives. It sold for about \$1,500 and inspired a parody blog titled "White Men Wearing Google Glass," featuring a man wearing the device in the shower.

Spiegel formally introduced Spectacles late Friday by wearing them in a black-and-white image shot by fashion photography legend Karl Lagerfeld. Kerr posted the photo on her Instagram account, quickly drawing nearly 90,000 likes over the weekend.

A mass audience didn't buy into Glass because it made people look like cyborgs, said Kayvan Mirza, chief executive of wearables maker Optinvent. Virtual reality devices including Oculus Rift and Sony PlayStation VR, which wrap around people's heads, do no better. Even bluetooth headsets, which had their heyday because of their utility, are an object of ridicule for how they make people look.

Adults might not want to don Spectacles, but that only further powers

Snapchat's appeal among 13-year-olds, the ultimate arbiters of cool in many tech investors' eyes.

"Snapchat's advantage over Google is they know how millennials think and what they want and have them as a captive audience," said Ori Inbar, founder and managing partner of Super Ventures.

A software company developing hardware is a difficult shift, but in a space without established players, "Snapchat has a shot just like anyone else," Inbar said.

Spectacles could affect more than the wearables market. Action camera maker GoPro could lose some users and buyers to Spectacles, while Snap rival Facebook may seek a way to respond with a product of its own. Snap also benefits from less baggage about privacy snafus than Facebook and Google.

Spectacles' appeal could widen if Snap allows other app makers to take advantage of the camera too. The product's website carries the description "Just for Snapchat." Snap spokespeople declined to comment about the label. They also refused to answer questions about Spectacles' components, manufacturing plans and details about how and when it would be sold.

Spiegel said the rollout of Spectacles would be slow and limited as the company figures out how the device fits into people's lives. Users tap a button near the hinge to record clips. A light goes off on the frame to alert people the camera is recording. The battery lasts about a day.

Snapchat, an advertising-supported app for sharing photos and videos up to 10 seconds in length, will gain a new revenue stream with the sunglasses. Any money is welcome to push the company toward profitability as it prepares for an expected initial public offering of stock

next year. It's Los Angeles' most valuable startup, with investors pegging its valuation at more than \$16 billion.

In a blog post describing the reasons for the name change to Snap, Spiegel seemed to tease the IPO.

"You can search Snapchat or Spectacles for the fun stuff and leave Snap Inc. for the Wall Street crowd," he wrote.

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