Wrist action: phone firms bet on 'year of smartwatch'

March 2 2015, by Roland Lloyd Parry

Chinese electronics group Huawei, one of the firms seeking to seduce buyers with Internet-connected devices, shows off its new smartwatch in Barcelona on March 1, 2015

Defying scepticism and geek-stigma, mobile phone firms are determined this year to sell you a wristwatch wirelessly connected to your mobile phone.

Numerous models have hit the market over the past year but 2015 will

see an explosion, analysts say, with manufacturers making their watches and other wearable connected devices more elegant and useful.

US giant Apple's release of its first "smartwatch"—expected by April—is set to make 2015 a "tipping point for wearables", research group CCS Insight said in a report.

In anticipation of that launch, Apple's Asian rivals scrambled to unveil their own connected wrist gadgets in Barcelona on Sunday on the eve of the World Mobile Congress trade show in Barcelona.

South Korean manufacturer LG released the Urbane LTE, its first fully connected luxury wristwatch that can make and receive calls—either with a wireless headset, or by speaking into your wrist like the comic book detective Dick Tracy.

Unlike most smartwatch models, the chunky Urbane LTE version has its own network SIM card with a mobile connection and so can be used for calls, without needing to be linked to a smartphone.

Chinese telecom giant Huawei also unveiled a deluxe smartwatch: a round stainless steel creation that it says can receive text messages, email and call notifications as well as monitoring your heart rate and calories burned.

The industry is watching keenly to see whether smartwatches will be the first mobile phone-linked "wearables" to really take off in the mass market—a tough call, according to analysts.

"In the end-user research that we've done, we asked people what a smartwatch is for and they had no idea," said Ben Wood, head of research at CCS Insight.

Technology and fashion

With the big phone companies piling in alongside smaller smartwatch specialists such as Pebble, fashion brands are doing their bit to try to design a more desirable product.

A new smartwatch from South Korean consumer goods giant LG, one of the new devices that analysts say will make 2015 a 'tipping point for wearables'

Several Swiss watchmakers and fashion brands such as Guess have unveiled designs, while jeweller Swarovski has encrusted smartwatches with its crystals for a deluxe look.

"The vast majority of smartwatches on the market are bulky and look more like a piece of technology than a fashion item," however, said Kevin Curran, a telecom specialist at the University of Ulster.

"That's going to change as companies focus more on design and making devices that are more discreet."

With their new circular watches, LG and Huawei positioned themselves at the luxury end of the market, differentiating themselves from the square-faced design revealed in previews by Apple.

"We set out to create smartwatches that could contend for a spot on your wrist with a luxury mechanical watch," said LG's head for Britain and Ireland, Andrew Coughlin.

The launches in Barcelona risk being overshadowed by Apple's release, however.

The Californian company is reportedly planning to ship five million units of its Apple Watch in the first batch.

"Everyone is watching to see what happens with that. Apple is the massive elephant in the room. We are estimating they could sell 20 million watches this year," said Wood.

That would dwarf the hundreds of thousands of other types of smartwatches that experts estimate have been sold so far.

Huawei's Consumer Business Group Chief Executive Officer Richard Yu presents the new "Huawei Watch" in Barcelona on March 1, 2015

Smart sex toys

Watches are just one of a variety of "wearables" that mobile companies are trying to sell to customers to use with their phones.

Designers have come up with all manner of bands, pendants—and even connected sex toys such as the remote-controlled vibrators produced by US-based company OhMiBod.

So far, the most successful wearables have been fitness trackers: bands that measure heart rate, calories, sleep quality and other data and send it to an application on the wearer's telephone.

Huawei and another big Chinese firm, HTC, on Sunday unveiled new

"fitness bands".

Curran said that about 90 million wearables were sold in 2014. He forecast that figure could soar to 200 million this year.

The companies refused to cite consumer prices for the new products. Top-end smartphones and smartwatches typically cost several hundred dollars (euros).

© 2015 AFP

Citation: Wrist action: phone firms bet on 'year of smartwatch' (2015, March 2) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2015-03-wrist-action-firms-year-smartwatch.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.