

Here today, Gone tomorrow

By Chris Gledhill, Managing Director, PDMS

At this time of year (early December, 9 hours to the copy deadline and counting...) I often find myself writing about the current must have Christmas gadgets, or trying to make more or less serious predictions about developments in technology over the next couple of years. And this year is no exception, I have left this article to the last minute again – due mainly to too many hours spent on ebay trying to get hold of that Wii games console I rashly promised the kids (only 50 quid more than list price direct from Bulgaria but don't tell them) - and now I'd better follow a tried and tested formula.

The question I keep coming back to is, why do some things catch on so quickly and other apparently great ideas just stagnate? Obviously if I actually knew the answer to this question I would a: keep it too myself and b: have ordered that Wii about 6 months ago – or maybe just bought the company. But here goes anyway.

Timing they say is everything and some products or even whole classes of products are totally identifiable with a particular time. Think of the filiofax, (if you are old enough) in the 1980s; something no self respecting yuppie would be seen without. Basically it was an inconveniently sized diary with overpriced refills. A mere 20 or so years later they seem about as business like as a bowler hat (try wearing one on Athol street). However, looking more closely it appears that even with the filofax it has its own evolutionary tree: filofax evolved into palm pilot which then crossed with the mobile phone to become Blackberry, today's symbol of executive indispensability.

Sometimes external factors create a new niche in a mature market, for example the MPV. Would the Espace and its successors have taken off the way they have if kids didn't have to wear seatbelts in the back? When I was a kid a family of 5 plus grandma, cousin Thelma and the dog would fit in a four door Ford Cortina, no problem (until it caught fire one Christmas eve carrying 8 carol singers). By contrast a couple of years ago I got my sums wrong and drove back from Douglas with an extra child in the car, horror of horrors 'how could I be so irresponsible!' In this case a change in the law and in social attitudes to risk has created a demand for a completely new shape and layout of car simply to accommodate a couple of extra seat belts.

In consumer electronics it's often just a question of price. When you start to see boxes of some previously coveted item such as a plasma telly or DVD player piled high in Tesco, you can be reasonably sure that they have reached the price threshold where they could be an impulse purchase and all of a sudden most people seem to have one or two. Often a new format or technology like this will be around for several years as a pricy specialist item – desirable but not affordable – before taking off very suddenly when the price breaches some psychological limit. This phenomenon is also often associated with the settling of a format war between competing standards such as the one currently brewing between Blu-Ray and HD-DVD to become the standard for high definition video.

Sometimes it just seems to be about the style and the packaging, with the iPod and now the iPhone, Apple seem to have acquired a happy knack of presenting an established idea in a new and accessible way. Most people demonstrating their shiny new iPhone will delight in demonstrating the intuitive way that they can zoom in on a picture of their gran's house on Google Earth direct from the address book with just a couple of twitches 'look there's Tiddles stuck in a tree again...' Amazing! But dare I say just a little bit pointless. However, nothing can take away from the fact that Apple, despite being a late entrant, totally overwhelmed the already established digital music player market with the iPod and now seems to be having a pretty good go at the phone / mobile media market, because if nothing else the iPhone has got us confused about our categories again – is it a smart phone or is it a media player, does it work as a web client or is it just a well marketed status symbol.

One of this years run away successes is the little Asus eePc. This is basically a very small laptop with a good web browser and a useable keyboard which starts up in 15 seconds, has built in wireless networking and costs less than 200 quid. This one device is expected to sell more units in its first 6 months than the entire world market for PDAs this year. In my opinion this type of device which makes mobile web access convenient and affordable will be the catalyst for the wide-scale adoption of all sorts of new or currently niche mobile applications. And that, for what it's worth, is my prediction – the web is going mobile for real now and to make the most of it you still need a keyboard. Well I do anyway.