

Design Magazine
Technology: You Are What You Consume
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The need to survive during this era of information overload has created a difficult situation for many of us. As we try to cope with the demands for our time and attention, our ability to retain and recall schedules, tasks, names, phone numbers, and other data essential for daily functioning has become strained and the details blurred. Myriad portable electronic devices have emerged to help us manage what can otherwise become chaos. These devices provide organization and easy access to our information; they even allow us to focus on the task at hand by freeing our minds of remembering what we must do next through timed gentle reminders.

We have fallen in love with this technology that so empowers us. Technology that expands our memory, reminds us of friends' birthdays, gives us the Internet in the palm of our hand, gets us a phone number and even dials it. These devices can make us smarter, faster, better, and constantly connected. Some people carry laptops, others have PDA's and almost everyone has a cell phone. However, if you're wired to technology all the time, is the technology working for you or, are you working for the technology? In the process of making our lives easier, does it become even more over-burdened?

We are now seeing multifunctional devices that are supposed to improve our lives but can also overwhelm and confuse us. There are PDA's with advanced features and technology so difficult to learn that many features go unused. We have phones that embarrass us by ringing at the worst times. There are GUIs that are impossible to navigate, buttons that are too small to use and text too small to see. Most PDA's are attractive but still too big. Many phones are attractive but already too small. There are many factors for designers to consider. Successfully designed devices should complement our fashion accessories such as watches, glasses, rings, bracelets, shoes, and purses, not compete with them. These electronic devices then become another part of an outfit, another part of your persona. Their implications about who you are and the kind of life you lead are limitless.

This connection of image and self to technology creates opportunities for designers to convert the technologies that we all desire because of their function into objects that provide the more intangible positive affirmation and aesthetics. The Psycho-Aesthetics concept authored by RKS proposes that the melding of technology and form is evolving these products into manifestations of our self-image. It isn't because the Sharp Zaurus PDA, the Samsung Palm Phone SPH-1300, the Handspring Trio or the Nokia 6310i phone are in and of themselves brilliant due to their outstanding aesthetics and integrated features - it's the consumer, the PDA or phone master, who is made brilliant by possessing such a superb product. It is an externalization of our adopting of technology in a design that resounds with our personality and creates a bond between the consumer and his/her technology. The brand on that technology is now your friend and, we are judged by the friends that we keep.

All the majors are developing concepts or products that combine phones, PDA's, real-time video, digital cameras, MP-3 players, etc. As product functions become more multi-tasked, so does their interface. This presents new challenges for the design industry that are further complicated by consumer needs for personalization, such as a particular combination of features, ergonomics, and color choice. By looking at what consumers want but may never be able to have, it's evident that we are moving toward products that make these deep and meaningful connections with consumers at an incremental pace. Revolutionary improvements such as integrating a keyboard into a PDA, a PDA into a phone or a PDA into a watch, such as with the Fossil Watch (designed

by my team at RKS Design) are pointing us in a very specific direction - the coming of integrated technologies that are minimally invasive on our persona, rich in aesthetics, brand and consumer experience, and delightful in their user interface.