

## High Street Jewellers had better Watch out!

It looks as if Watchmakers and Jewellers across the country will need to prepare for major changes if the recently launched Google Android Wear Smartwatch range takes off.

The last time we saw a change in the High Street like this was when one of the mobile phone chains became the UK's biggest camera seller, and they didn't even sell cameras. At first it looked like a statistical mistake until it dawned on us that almost every mobile phone had a built-in camera. With the nation armed with a camera in their pockets, traditional camera sales plummeted. One by one, traditional retail camera shops closed leaving just the specialists.

Last week (July 2014) Google Play began shipping Google Wear Smartwatches. Smart watches have been around for a while but until now they were generally tied to a particular brand or model of phone and mostly considered to be gadgets. All this has changed in the last week. Google has partnered with three major players in the mobile phone world; LG, Samsung and Motorola. LG and Samsung smartwatches are now on sale, with the Motorola 360 close behind.

Looking a bit like the iconic Casio Calculator watch with its tiny stylus based buttons, the original calculator watch and the new generation of electronic watches couldn't be further apart. In fact Google has been smart enough not to put a calculator function on the watches by default during the launch stage, quite possibly to avoid any photographic comparisons.

These watches are not wrist phones. They have no speaker or phone SIM and can only properly function when connected by low power Bluetooth wireless to an Android phone. Yes, to almost any recent Android phone. As Android is the most widely used operating system on mobiles, the market is massive. So, what is it good for? Well, I've had an LG G watch on my wrist for a few days, and to be frank, I'm lost when without it. Someone somewhere recently calculated the average number of times we take our phone out of our pockets or bags per day to check for messages, texts and emails, although heaven knows where they got the data from. The answer was in the hundreds, most of which were to find out why the phone had just gone 'ding'. Many of my messages are to let me know that I can claim damages for an accident I haven't had, that I can get two suits dry cleaned for the price of one and that the widow of some African Politician wants to send me a billion dollars. If only she did. The point is that on many occasions we take our phones out of our pockets for no good reason at all.

Google's Smart Watches have fixed that problem plus a whole lot more. When the phone rings you preview the caller's name or number on your watch face. Likewise you can preview a text message, see who has sent you an email and get alerts from a host of other phone Apps. But it doesn't stop there. Say "Ok Google", and you can then say "Take me to the nearest pub" or "Translate Station into French". In fact, more or less any question you can think of. The power of "Ok Google" is now on your wrist. Android Studio, the latest Android application development tool, already contains templates and code for Google Wear and developers are working hard to create a host of useful Apps for the watches.

On that basis, why would you want a watch that only told you the time?

The answer of course is style. The jury is out on whether LG and Samsung have gone in the right direction here, but the jewel in the crown has got to be the circular Motorola 360. This marks the frontier between Geeky IT phone wrist devices and the next decade of watches. Don't get me wrong though, the LG G watch and the Samsung Gear are perfectly wearable and make it clear which decade you belong in. When it arrived, I thought to myself 'How can I wear that with short sleeves?' The convenience and power of the product turned that into 'Why should I care if people think I'm a bit of a geek?'. The Motorola 360 however makes it clear that you belong in the not too distant future where others will admire both your technology and your style. Roll on September...

All is not lost in the High Street though, because LG has had the foresight to supply their watch with a very plain rubber 22mm Diver's strap. As soon as you put it on your wrist you know you need to find a more stylish bracelet. This appears to have been a double edged sword – it kept the retail price down and also ensured that most LG Gs would look personalised. In other words, user generated style. If their Smart watches sell as well as I expect they will, the owners will be in their local jeweller the next day, choosing a strap or bracelet. I changed my LG's rubber strap to a black stainless steel bracelet, and it completely transformed it, making it far less conspicuous.

The Samsung Gear's curved body does seem to restrict the choice a little, but reduces the need to change the strap. It is early days to predict what strap arrangement the Motorola 360 will have, but it looks less accommodating.

Will mobile phone shops become the UK's biggest watch sellers? Who can say, but it does look that way. We can expect the major watch brands to fight back with branded Smart watches, but will they have access to the very sophisticated technology required to manufacture these products without going to the mobile phone giants? I very much doubt it if they want to pack them with fast processors and RAM. I agree that they have years of sophistication behind them in terms of style and branding, but this is mostly based on a tradition of mechanical precision. It certainly doesn't bode well for analogue movement manufacturers.

When mobile phones began to steal the camera market, most camera retailers put their heads in the sand and just kept selling cameras. Watch retailers cannot afford to ignore this threat to their market, regardless of the size of threat it turns out to be. Get hold of some stock and put it in the window with various different straps fitted. Make a feature of it and show the consumer who sells watches. Stock spare chargers and learn how to fit batteries. Obviously you will be competing with online vendors, but which trade doesn't? Not everyone wants to buy online.

It seems that the traditional watch brands will need the technology giants, but the giants won't necessarily need the traditional brands. One thing is certain – Smartwatches don't use button cells, and the multi-million business of manufacturing and fitting of those looks doomed in the near future.

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