

Kevin McCullagh predicts W800 will strike a chord

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Sony Ericsson's rough first quarter was blamed on inventory glitches, squeezed subsidies and fickle consumers.

Another explanation for its 28% drop in profits was that Sony Ericsson just didn't have a must-have phone in its lineup – like the incredibly successful T610 that drove growth in the previous year.

The company should not have problems in the buildup to Christmas. The W800 Walkman phone, which is scheduled to be launched in August, with its music player, 2-megapixel camera and seductive styling, has "hit" written all over it.

Mobile music has been billed as the next big thing for the past few years. With Samsung being first on the block with an MP3 phone in 2000, Sony – the original music-on-the-move brand – is rather late to the party. But the art of introducing new technology is in the timing and execution. The prizes rarely go to the first mover, but to the catalyst product that hits the point where sales cross the chasm between niche and mass market.

The iPod is a classic example. Launched in 2001 – a year after Creative Lab's first hard-disk "jukebox" – it was the right product at the right time and defined the MP3-player category. Apple now sets the music-industry agenda, and all mobile music products are judged in its wake.

The fact that Sony has bestowed the W800 with the tribute of being the first Walkman phone indicates that it believes it has created a product that is mature enough to merit one of the most iconic brands. The decision to put the Walkman brand on the device begs the question of whether the W800 will be a category-defining product in the same league as the original Walkman and the iPod. And will it change the way we listen to music?

One lump or two?

The big hope in the mobile industry is that the next step for music consumers will be to rationalize their "lumps." After picking up your wallet and keys, why not pocket a combined phone and MP3 player? It's one less device to carry and recharge.

While it seems like a no-brainer on the face of it, there are two subtle but vital problems to crack. The first hitch is the track record of products that promise to deliver more than one major function – think Nokia Communicator. Until recently, multifunctional devices tended to be oversized, pricey and clunky compromises. The success of the latest generation of compact smartphones has proved that task-focused business users and techies are willing to accept the trade-off between increased functionality and stylish pocketability. Everyday Joes and Josephines, on the other hand, tend to prioritize petite good looks and ease of use.

The march of miniaturization has enabled more functionality to be shoehorned into small form factors. Cam-

eras now come as standard, offering considerable benefits for limited compromises in size and usability. No one could accuse the W800 of being either big or clunky.

One of the secrets of the iPod's success is Apple's ruthless focus on doing one job very well. Steve Jobs briefed the designers to focus on navigating music at the expense of additional functionality. The music-player application wasn't working on the W800 I tested at the CeBIT trade show in March, so the jury is still out on how well Sony Ericsson has resolved this key interface issue.

We should not stop at the product-user interface. Apple's resolution of the interface between the user, the iPod and the iTunes software service has set an awesome gold standard. The service aspect is the second big issue Sony must resolve. It knows plenty about how to make gorgeous gadgets, but software and service design have not traditionally been its strong suit. The ease with which users will be able to manage music on both their PC and phone will be a key factor in determining whether the W800 will define the music-phone category.

But the critical reason the W800 will still be a hit is far more elusive: It rates highly on the "must have" scale. The W800 is targeted firmly at the 45% of 15- to 35-year-olds who think a phone says as much about a person as his car. Despite their rhetoric of individuality, this segment flocks to a phone icon – a handset with rare star quality. The last clear example of such a phone was Sony Ericsson's T610. Before that, classic examples were the Nokia 3310 and 8210, with the 8110 – the so-called "banana phone" – providing an early case in point.

The W800 shares common traits with these buzz-generating superstars: conceptual clarity, distinctive good looks and exquisitely resolved details. On pure product "look and feel," it is streets ahead of the pack, and the finish of its surfaces are particularly stunning.

Iconic phones tend to be aligned with blue moons, but Sony Ericsson is about to launch two at once. The K750i – which is based on the same platform and is due to launch at the end of May – is also mightily impressive.

So the sleeping giant of Sony Ericsson is finally getting into its stride. Its history in consumer electronics has taught the firm that the secret to great mobile phones is getting the whole product experience right. That involves the right mix of distinctive product identity, seductive look and feel, the right size and weight, meaningful features, intuitive product, software and service interfaces, and crisp screen graphics.

There are no formulas – just very human and nuanced compromises.

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