



MY SAY: End of the road for the Walkman

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It was one of the most innovative inventions of its time, and lasted for more than a generation. Some 30 years ago, the Walkman — a portable audio cassette player — burst onto the world stage, thanks to Sony, one of the world's most creative electronics companies. But like all things, there is always an expiry date, and for the Walkman, it came quite unexpectedly on Oct 28 this year.

In this column last year (July 13, 2009), I had written about the difficulty the Walkman was going through. One reason was that the widening gap between the gadget and a newer generation of technologically advanced devices, like Apple's iPod, made it difficult for Sony to catch up, let alone continue to lead.

This is especially when Sony professes not to imitate its rivals, limiting its scope of competition in a business that is wide open to imitators and inventors alike. Sony has been struggling to preserve its reputation in the world of electronics, which is moving relentlessly at breakneck speed.

Many of today's generation are no longer in tune with the Walkman, with some regarding it as a technology of the past.

Though Sony is not insensitive to such sentiment — it has faced some bitter experiences when it comes to public acceptance of innovative products — the reality is that the digital age is unforgiving. Sony's Betamax video cassette recorder, Trinitron TV and robotic pet Aibo are a case in point. Now, it is the Walkman's turn — at least the Walkman cassette player. The last consignment reportedly left Japan for the retailers in April 2010, with production ceasing in that country after that.

Some 200 million cassette Walkmans have made their way into the hands of consumers worldwide, out of more than 400 million of all types of Walkmans sold globally up to March this year. Outside Japan, Chinese manufacturers are said to be continuing to sell Sony-branded cassette Walkmans for the larger Asia and Middle East market, as well as the US and Europe.

This means there is still a fighting chance for the compact disc (CD) and mini disc (MD) Walkman (more appropriately called Discman), as well as flash memory-based models.

It will not be plain sailing however, given the way the music industry has been transformed in this era of the Internet, where tunes can be downloaded directly into a gadget.

Unlike the early 1980s, the Walkman is now not the only way to listen to music of your choice while on the move. In a way, this was one of the Walkman's contributions — the "freedom" or democratisation of music, for which it is now paying a hefty price.

Incidentally, like the print industry before that, the music industry has, over the past three decades, experienced a precipitous rise and fall. The runaway success of the CD format turned the music industry into one of the most cherished and high-profile industries globally. But this is about to end due to the advent of file sharing. The digital music age of music downloads has changed everything.

It is times like this that we begin to learn how the industry actually ticked. To be sure, like all businesses, there is always a dark side to it that causes upheaval. Steve Knopper in his book *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*, reveals how major labels, rather than technology companies, were the ones that decided on the formats as well as music. He writes that the music labels were offered the chance to embrace MP3 technology and to own it in the same way as cassettes and CDs.

Unfortunately this was not music to their ears, and they turned it down. What ensued was the beginning of their own demise after years of denials and bad decisions in the face of dramatic technological advances. They were blinded by the enormous wealth and excesses of the early years, a time of plump profits and ballooning budgets when the business adopted the CD format.

Is this a repeat of the history of the wristwatch? The analogue wristwatch faced dire straits after the Japanese

"invented" the digital version and took the market by surprise. This time though, it was the emergence of Napster and iTunes that changed the game.

The digital age insidiously sneaked in and created a nightmare for the music industry. Welcome to the world of digital technology. To the Walkman, thanks for the music, and go in peace.

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