

## MY SAY: The harsh world of innovation

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Thirty years ago on July 1, a revolution took place in the media world with implications that are still felt today. It was the day the Walkman made its appearance on the world stage. Marketed in 1979 in Japan under the same name, the device is known elsewhere by other names — Soundabout in most places, including the US; Stowaway in the UK; and Freestyle in Sweden.

All, however, refer to a gadget that was invented in 1978 by Sony as a portable audio cassette player and later incorporated a video player as well. It changed the way audio-visuals were "consumed" throughout the world, initially among youngsters. The Walkman's excellent quality output and ease of use soon made it a product of choice for almost all generations globally.

There are various versions of the "man", ranging from Pressman and Discman to Watchman and Talkman, some more popular than others, but all with a new "on the move" concept that was considered very modern back then.

The Walkman was so innovative that more than 380 million units have been sold worldwide over the last three decades. It is said to be the one brand that enabled a company with humble beginnings in 1946 and just 20 employees to become one of the first Japanese companies to go global successfully.

More importantly, Sony continues to churn out innovations like compact discs, minidisks and digital formats, each more sophisticated and featuring more advanced functions. It is no coincidence that even Apple's iPod has some resemblance to some of these devices.

As to how the product came into being makes a good story. The most popular one is that it was an attempt to meet the request of Sony's then co-chairman, who wanted to be able to listen to operas during his frequent transpacific plane trips. It was to replace an existing portable version that was too heavy to carry.

Another version says the Walkman was in response to youngsters who had to lug around large radio-cum-tape recorders to listen to music and be entertained, some while skateboarding. It seems this led to the creation of something more portable and personalised for the purpose of being entertained anywhere anytime and without loud music bothering other people.

Yet another version says it was to accommodate the Japanese culture of needing to "escape" and meditate, especially while travelling in a crowded environment. The Walkman was one device that fulfilled this requirement — to be able to meditate without any interruption anywhere anytime.

Out of this historic event have come many lessons that we should take note of. One is the acknowledgement that innovation is not necessarily about earth-shattering discoveries. Rather, it is about the "repackaging" of existing technology, which is what the Walkman is all about. Although the use of earphones then was associated with people with hearing disability, creative repackaging changed all that.

Second, an innovation can be culturally driven. On a more general note, tradition and technology are not mutually exclusive. The former can help fire new technological ideas if it is properly understood and articulated. The Japanese community certainly mastered this symbiosis.

Third, and most significant, is Sony's insistence that it never aspired to be a winner by imitating rivals. Still, the company is reportedly "struggling to reinvent itself and win back its reputation as a pioneer of razzle-dazzle gadgetry once exemplified in the Walkman". This is more so today when the market is flooded with new ideas that have left Sony struggling to take the lead in innovation like it did 30 years ago.

"The Walkman's gap with the iPod has grown so definitive that it would be extremely difficult for Sony to catch up, even if it were to start from scratch to try to boost market share," says an analyst.

Indeed, this is the world of innovation where ideas and flexibility rule supreme in pushing back technological boundaries. Otherwise, even leaders can be reduced to mere footnotes in history. In fact, Sony's other inventions — the Beta-max video cassette recorder, the Trinitron TV and the Aibo dog-shaped robotic pet — were unable to hold their lead for a long time.

And if the company is not careful, the Walkman could be the next victim in the harsh world of innovation.

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