

The mobile and wireless accessory market is now a multi-million pound concern and there are literally thousands of software and hardware 'add-ons' to choose from. This article explores the more unusual, amusing and quirky side to the accessory market. Runs to 1774 words.

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Excess Accessories

So you've made it big in the city and can now smugly retire to your Park Lane condo to count your gold cards and polish your top-of-the-range Mercedes. You've got, of course, the latest all-singing, all dancing mobile phone, so what else can the man or woman who has everything spend all that hard-earned cash on? Mobile accessories of course!

Had you seen which way the mobile market wind was blowing, you probably made your money in the burgeoning wireless accessory sector anyway. A quick search on the Internet soon reveals that there are thousands of Web sites dedicated to equipping your mobile with all the latest add-on gizmos to transform your humble handset into a statement of style. Manufacturers have spent millions of dollars on advertising the mobile as the new fashion accessory, emphasising a phones sleek good looks, funky design or fluorescent colours as much as the new technology inside.

The mobile is now, like the car, part of your 'lifestyle statement', an extension of ego that says something about who you are. As any text-obsessed teenager clutching the latest yellow and pink spotted model to their bosom will tell you, you are what you phone and manufacturers are ready, willing and able to exploit this peer-pressure-fuelled mindset.

Now that the world and his wife has a cellphone and the new phone markets get saturated, Ericsson, Motorola, Nokia and other manufacturers now see conformity to the latest fads as a key money maker.

But no matter how hard your typical teenage fashion victim struggles to be 'an individual', deep down it must be annoying that someone, somewhere has also got that same 'limited edition' Yves Saint Laurent case cover you exceeded your credit limit for yesterday. What is a trendsetter to do? Well, for the ultimate in unique chic, why not design your own case and really stand out from the crowd?

With swappable covers now the biggest selling mobile phone accessory in the UK, entrepreneurs David Goodman and Adrian Heywood saw a lucrative opportunity to exploit those looking for the ultimate in individualism by allowing them to easily design their own one-of-a-kind covers on the Net.

At www.makemyphone.co.uk all you need to do is upload your favourite jpeg picture, position it on a mock-up of a Nokia cover, hand over UK£24.99 and a mere day or so later your one-of-a-kind creation drops through your letterbox.

As Heywood says, "The whole business was born trying to meet the needs that we saw in the consumer. The phone cover is the largest selling mobile phone accessory and yet you're restricted to the union jack, Stars and Stripes or a picture of Bugs Bunny. We tried to blend together the fact that people want the ability to personalise them."

But these boys have more than just phones in their sights. According to Goodman "The scope is limitless. We've talked about music labels, film studios, fan clubs, corporate incentives, mugs, mouse mats, T-shirts - an endless list". "We want to go big", says Heywood, "but we're starting with something that we can manage, fulfil and deliver. Once we've proven the concept, then we can begin to push the boat out. "

But if having a handset bearing a picture of your nearest and dearest sunbathing on the beach last holiday isn't quite exclusive enough for you and you've got more money than sense, you'll be glad to hear that the world's first luxury mobile phone company has been launched by Nokia.

Vertu, a new, independent subsidiary of the mobile giant, is launching its US\$21,240 luxury handset at up-market and exclusive shopping areas in the United States, Europe and Asia soon. Dripping in such frivolous excesses as

a pure Platinum casing and sapphire crystal glass screen, the more ostentatious amongst you may feel the need to wear it as jewellery rather than a communication device. If Platinum's not your colour relax, future models promise to come in 18-carat white and yellow gold and possibly be adorned with precious stones.

Unlike Ericsson's gold clad model or Motorola's modest gold and black diamond version, the Vertu versions will have technological depth as well as flashy looks. It's specially crafted components, made by the world's most prestigious manufacturers, will bring you superior sound quality, a calendar, contact book, games and other easily up-graded innards especially designed for the filthy rich, including the Vertu Concierge service.

A special key on the side of the phone will allow clients to connect to a team of operators who have specialised travel and entertainment information and who will be able offer assistance in major cities around the world - much like a network of fine hotels. Every tycoon should have one!

"You have to think from the inside out. This is not an aesthetic covering of an existing product," said Vertu chief designer Frank Nuovo.

Nokia hopes their prestigious brand will carve out a whole fresh segment in the wireless pie for high-profit luxury goods fuelled by the same urge for exclusivity that has already revived the watch, clothes and car industries.

With nearly everyone of more modest means and their mother now owning a mobile, the three big manufacturers have made no secret of the fact that offering a bewildering array of accessories is a key marketing factor and have spent millions on advertising in an effort to re-invent the mobile as a mode of expression.

Here in the UK, in a triumph of style over substance advertising, one of the big high street phone retailer's latest campaign chooses not sell phones but accessories, or rather the 'popularity' and 'fulfilment' the latest attachment can bring. It features an 'old fashioned' (i.e. last years'), unadorned mobile, replete

with arms, legs and sentience, cast out by it's young and mocking, target market owners to tramp the streets alone and neglected. Had he only visited the advertiser for a new and snazzy case or up-to-the-minute annoying ring tone, so the story goes, he'd be 'Mr Trendy Popularity' again. In other words, get an accessory and you get a life.

But it's not just mobile phones that are ripe for the makeover treatment. With all that money you've got to burn, you've probably got a rural, Kampong-style, beachside retreat somewhere up the Malaysian East Coast? Your rather metallic **standard Palm III, Palm V or Palm VII would seriously compromise that all-wood rustic look** so why not transform it into something that wouldn't look so out of place in the jungle? At www.geekteek.com you can make your PDA blend in with the décor with a 100% natural wood veneer. You can choose from Cherry, Walnut, Maple, Purple Heart, Teak, Padauk or Mahogany and all can be optionally laser engraved with your name.

As well as a second beachside home, any self-respecting millionaire has his or her own Jet Ski and/or yacht. If you love the manly rough and tumble of water sports but can't bear to be parted from your PDA, you can't do worse than The Electronic Armor Palm Case from CellSafe Inc. (www.cellsafe.com). It's a virtually indestructible case for protecting your electronic accoutrements in outdoor situations.

So when you hit a bad wave or white squall and go flying overboard, have no fear. The crushproof, shockproof case weighs just 8 oz., is watertight down to 100ft and will float contents weighing up to 12oz in padded comfort. It's bright yellow underside means it can be easily spotted and the clear, polycarbonate top enables you to see the screen if, for instance, you want to catch up on some emails while waiting for the coast guard to rescue you. If, on the other hand, your biggest adventure is battling the rush hour crowds on the MRT, you may not need the ultimate protection that this case offers. You could always plump instead for a titanium or aluminium case and stylus, hand-crafted antique leather case, re-charger kit, batteries, folding keyboard,

radiation shields, writing surface protector or any one of hundreds of add-ons available. For the bottomless wallet, the list is endless and now includes even being able to watch videos on your cell phone or PDA.

Los Angeles based PacketVideo has created software that enables the delivery of video to wireless portable devices. While you float around aimlessly in the South China Sea you can catch up on the latest news, watch your favourite sport or access a 'how to survive shark attack' video.

According to Rob Tercek, President of programming for PacketVideo, mobile phones are much more logical platforms than PCs or TVs to build the next generation of personal interactivity.

"They're the most personal devices going," Tercek said. "You might share your PC or TV with your family but you're not going to let me program my numbers onto your cellular phone. Your mobile phone is designed to talk to. It can be reached anywhere and you can receive any kind of service. Our (video) software will be in 90 percent of mobile (communication) devices over the next year and a half," he predicted. The company's video-player software already comes standard with new Hewlett-Packard Jornada and Compaq iPaq handheld computers. Encase one of these in the CellSafe and floating around in your private pool becomes a much more entertaining experience.

Across Asia the future for both hardware and software accessories looks bright. In Mainland China and Taiwan, where the mobile market is still young and restless, sales of hands-free kits are predicted to soar as the mobile continues to insinuate itself into every corner of society. In Japan, where subscriptions to i-mode jumped from 20 million to 29 million in just six months in 2001, demand continues to grow, leaving manufacturers and providers scrambling to keep up with consumer's demand for the latest fixture.

So if you are one of those who hasn't yet reached the dizzy heights of prime site condo ownership don't worry. Investing in the seemingly insatiable mobile

accessory market could well set you on the path to that solid gold, diamond-encrusted handset you've always wanted!

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