

Glamorous gizmos - Cult of celebrity has made devices the objects of our desire

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The fete had the pomp and pedigree of a Tinseltown premiere. Superstars in attendance. A global media presence. Flashbulbs popping and observers oohing and aahing with lust and awe. When the stars were finally unveiled, there were audible gasps.

Behold onlookers — a phone and a music player!

Huh?

"Everybody was talking about it," said Ivan Williams of Lithonia, who purchased a Motorola ROKR phone the first day it went on sale. "As soon as it hit the front page, I had to get it. I had been waiting."

Drop that US Magazine and grab a copy of Wired: from iPods to RAZRs to TiVo and XBOX — personal tech products have evolved into the new celebrity.

"They're a personality," said Marcus V. Colombano, partner in Avantgarde, a San Francisco technology, entertainment and design marketing firm. "A phone, an iPod? each of these have a mystique about them. It has reflections of a person, it's an extension of a person."

Technology, more specifically, products and devices, are earning a space in hearts and psyches typically reserved for movie stars, sports figures and rock gods.

Look no further than five years ago for the first sign, when countless consumers camped out overnight to be the first to clutch a PlayStation 2. It reached a zenith last month, when Apple Computer unveiled the ROKR phone and its new iPod nano mp3 player in a headline news event. Neither product was particularly revolutionary. But the charge it gave people, bordered on ecstatic.

"Technology has become an integral part of people's ordinary lives in a way that previous communications technologies didn't —with the possible exception of the telephone," said Andrew Nachison, director of The Media Center, a Reston, Va. think tank which studies the intersection of media technology and society. "The marketing and hype is really becoming a cultural marker the way celebrity and entertainment have been in the past."

Witness the descriptions. Consumer electronics are now commonly hailed as "sleek," "hot," and "sexy." These devices are often coupled with actual human notables to garner notice. But now, the gadgets are eclipsing the fame of their infamous users.

["They are the stars," said Brian Solis, founder of FutureWorks, a Silicon Valley-based high tech PR agency. "These devices? You have to be seen with them."](#)

Expect further pomposity as Apple holds another press conference this Wednesday. The subject is top-secret, but, if rumors hold true, flashbulbs will be a-popping at it's latest luminary: a video-enabled iPod. Yet flash and marketing are thin and transient gimmicks. Genuine affection involves

more meat. And one of the reasons why a new generation of electronic goods are now a cause célèbre, is that these products are storing shards of the soul.

The household telephone never evolved into such a personal item. It was — and is — a conduit. But a wireless phone has important numbers stored, meaningful photographs, personal schedules, video and music.

"It's just an object," Colombano said. "But if you interact with it, you have a personal relationship with it."

Take TiVo, for example, the digital video recording device that has earned a cult of devotees. The words "love" and "TiVo" appear to be inseparable to those who own one. The product name has all but become a verb ("I need to TiVo tonight's 'Lost' "). The VCR never bonded with such affection.

Why? Again, inside the mechanics, are pieces of information that are a customized reflection of its owner's taste and personality. The focus on such seeming frivolity may be driven by the times.

War. Disaster. An unpleasant economy. Rising gas prices. Dread. Despair.

Inspiration and distraction comes from odd sources. Even an mp3 player.

"People are desperately looking for good news," said Josh Quittner, editor of Business 2.0 magazine. "We're being deluged with bad news. When we seize upon a product that's exciting and takes us away from all this, we embrace it."

Quittner pointed to the Great Depression, when masses of the beleaguered headed to picture shows to worship the faces of the silver screen. During this era, the movie star was born. When Quittner recently visited an Apple Store to purchase a nano, he saw a similar sense of escapism.

"It was like a celebrity event," he said. "People giggling with excitement for the opportunity to spend \$200."

Much like celebrities whose lifestyle and looks people revere without much thought, could blind loyalty to personal tech result in an equal distortion of reality?

"Some teenagers have more contact with their iPod than parents or friends," said Nadine Gelberg, founder of Philadelphia-based Get Charged, a non-profit organization that encourages critical thought about technology.

Yet, like the flesh-and-blood counterparts, people turn fickle toward their celebs. Fast. Williams returned his ROKR 10 days later for a Nokia 6682, which he said has more memory capacity and function.

"It's kind of hard to keep up," he said.

Clifford Butler is stalking his stars months — if not years — ahead. He's been drooling over the XBOX 360 arriving in stores next month. After that, it's the PlayStation3, predicted to debut in 2006.

"It's a big deal for me," said Butler. "You know how boys get with their toys."