

## WATCHMAKERS ARM PRODUCTS

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I frown on people who steer with one hand while yakking away and holding a cell phone in the other. I preach two hands on the wheel.

But I have to confess that while trying out a new SPOT -- Smart Personal Objects Technology -- watch, I couldn't stop glancing at my wrist at traffic stops. I checked the Chicago weather forecast, temperatures in warmer climes, news headlines and stock prices.

The watch even can deliver short text messages from MSN Messenger -- though the watch is not equipped to respond. It also receives appointments synced in from the Outlook calendar -- an invaluable service for me because I often leave my personal digital assistant in the charger cradle when I rush for that 7:33 a.m. train.

Microsoft already rules the computer operating system market. Now, with PC sales flat, the giant from Redmond, Wash., has a vision with SPOT to rule our wrists and who knows what else. Last month, Microsoft and its partners, Fossil Inc., the nation's No. 1 watch seller, and Suunto Inc., the Finnish sports watch company, launched the new SPOT watches.

The n3 from Suunto, with a longer warranty and extended charge time and a scratch-resistant face, costs \$299. Fossil's Wrist Net models range in price from \$129 for the Abacus to \$199 for its Dick Tracy-branded Wrist Net. (Though the latter is modeled after the cartoon detective's watch and offers Dick Tracy-themed watch faces, technology has yet to quite catch up with cartoonist Chester Gould's vision of the two-way video wristwatch.)

"The goal (behind SPOT) was that we thought we could make everyday life better and more purposeful through the power of software," said Chris Schneider, senior program manager with Microsoft's SPOT group.

SPOT is a big deal for the Microsofties. When the company introduces any new product, a top-level exec sponsors its development; Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates was SPOT's godfather. Three years ago, a research team began researching and building a new software platform and hardware to "deliver information to everyday objects," Schneider said. Microsoft is interested in

deploying SPOT everywhere -- microwave ovens, alarm clocks, key chains, clothing -- but research indicated consumers wanted the information first on their wrists, she said.

Microsoft then went to the two watchmakers.

Dan Colliander, president of Suunto, the world's leading dive computer maker, said he initially rejected the SPOT concept when Microsoft approached him 1 1/2 years ago.

"We thought that having information on your wrist that is not sports-specific can be done with a PDA or a cell phone," he said. "But when we thought about it a bit, we realized that the extra data is a natural extension of what we did. The PDA and the cell phone had one big negative -- you have to push a lot of buttons to get information. With the wristwatch, we can make customized information available at a glance."

Microsoft developed a wireless network to send out the data in the top 100 markets in the United States and Canada. SPOT watches have built-in antennas to download data. Suunto's timepiece has an antenna around its face. The Fossil watches have antennas built into the wrist band. SPOT watches have other features that take a little getting used to.

You may be accustomed to regularly charging your cell phones and PDAs, and perhaps changing watch batteries every couple years. But hooking up your watch to the wall socket for juice is a new twist.

Fossil's watch needs to be recharged every two days through a system similar to that used on electric toothbrushes. The Suunto, which needs a boost every five or six days, is connected with a device that looks like a jumper cable. With the addition of software, it also can be recharged through a computer's USB port. The heavy lifting of receiving data is a battery drain.

And these watches have a subscription fee. The wireless service to run the watches costs \$59 a year or \$9.95 a month through MSN Direct at [direct.msn.com](http://direct.msn.com). You can register two watches for this price.

For basic information, the SPOT watches seem to hit the spot. But some watch mavens have not been impressed.

**Steve Lundin, technology editor of International Wristwatch magazine and chief executive of Chicago-based BIGfrontier Communications Group, said, "Microsoft will have a tough time competing with the ubiquitous PDA for portable real-time data turf. There's a big difference between squinting at a 3-by-4-inch screen and a 1-by-1-inch screen, and user experience is a critical factor for success in this space.**

**"This product gets a big thumbs-up for its gee-whiz factor, but may turn out to be the new millennium's Pet Rock for the wrist. You won't see any company taking a majority stake on the public's wrists until someone invents**

**the two-way watch/camera/phone, and, to the best of my knowledge, only Dick Tracy has one of those."**

Jonathan Spira, chief executive officer and chief analyst at Basex, a tech research and consulting firm, said SPOT is still in the "novelty phase. It has a few bits of useful information, but it won't be enough for information junkies. It's a gimmick right now and it has to do a lot more to catch on, such as becoming a mobile phone. I'd have difficulty taking off my elegant timepiece and putting on an inelegant SPOT watch."

Still, several of the more style-conscious people I know really liked the nerdy-looking Fossil. I liked the Suunto, though I had a hard time fitting it under my shirt cuff; one of the fashionistas said the kewl thing now is to wear the watches on the outside of the cuff. I guess.

Suunto's pricier watch, which is waterproof to 330 feet and has a scratch-resistant dial, has a two-year guarantee. Fossil has a 90-day guarantee. But a consumer who is unhappy for any reason has 30 days to return the SPOT watch. No questions asked.

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