Pebble

By Russ McGuire - russ.mcguire@gmail.com

In the past couple of weeks, three events have had me considering buying a Pebble watch. I had registered at the Pebble website back in December. A couple of weeks ago I got an e-mail letting me know that the Pebble would soon be available at Best Buy. Then I got another e-mail letting me know that the backlog was down enough I could now order a Pebble through their website. Then, this week I attended the MobileBeat conference in San Francisco and almost every discussion worked its way around to the topic of wearable computing, of which the Pebble is one of the most high profile examples.

What is Pebble?

The Pebble website says this: "Pebble is the first watch built for the 21st century. It's infinitely customizable, with beautiful downloadable watch-faces and useful internet-connected apps. Pebble connects to iPhone and Android smartphones using Bluetooth, alerting you with a silent vibration to incoming calls, emails and messages. While designing Pebble, we strove to create a minimal-ist yet fashionable product that seamlessly blends into everyday life."

Pebble is the most successful "smart watch" to date. In fact, at the time of its introduction, the Pebble was the most successful Kickstarter campaign ever. In part because of Pebble's success, Apple, Samsung, and Google are all rumored to be working on smart watches, and there are other competing products already on the market.

As I mentioned above, smart watches fit into the broader category of "wearable computing." A few months ago I wrote about Google Glass – probably the most controversial example yet of

wearable computing – and in fact at MobileBeat, several participants were walking around wearing their Google Glass. (It was a little unnerving – are they recording me? Are they searching the web for information about me?) The most common forms of wearable computing today are fitness trackers like the Jawbone Up, the Nike Fuelband, and the various Fitbit products.

Amongst smart watches, there are a few different approaches. The Pebble strongly leverages the smartphone itself through a Bluetooth connection. The Pebble can be customized and even run some simple applications, but mostly it relies on a (wirelessly) connected smartphone for sensors and information. Competing products with a similar approach include the Meta Watch and the Cookoo. The main advantage of this approach is long battery life (by smartphone standards – up to about a week).

The second category is represented by products like the Sony SmartWatch, the AGENT, and Motorola's MotoACTV. These are full computing platforms on your wrist with development environments, powerful graphical displays, and often a touch-screen for full interactivity. These tend to be big, bulky, and power hungry (don't expect much more than a day of battery life), but they let you embrace your tech geekiness to the fullest.

The third major category are watches with sensors built in, primarily for health and fitness monitoring. The most prominent example is the Nike+ SportWatch, but I'm most impressed with the Basis, which has 9 different sensors for tracking motion, heartrate, skin temperature, and perspiration.

What is good about smart watches?

Nothing screams tech cred like a smart watch. How could anyone question your technology awareness and knowledge when you're wearing such geeky fashion? These practical accessories can help us in projecting the technology leadership role that we play in our ministries.

However, we do have to overcome the stereotypes we face as technology leaders, and smart watches can truly help.

Some might say that technology leaders struggle with basic social graces. They might say that we can't look them in the eye and carry on a normal conversation because we're too busy looking at our various screens. Of course, such critics fail to realize how social we are being by staying fully connected to our online social networks of various flavors. Most smart watches will alert you of incoming texts, tweets, and posts, meaning that with a simple glance at your watch you can satisfy your connectivity urge while still carrying on a polite face-to-face conversation.

Some might also characterize us as a pasty and pudgy lot from a lack of sunshine and exercise. Most smart watches are designed to encourage physical activity. For example, the Basis encourages us to adopt reasonable fitness habits that are achievable even by the mousebound. And of course, we can still stay connected through various apps while taking that short walk through the neighborhood.

What is dangerous about smart watches?

As with any technology that connects us more into the big databases in the cloud, we should be aware of what information is being collected and how it might be used. A few years ago a site launched called "Please Rob Me" which used location information from social networks to identify when people weren't home. Thankfully the site has been transformed into an educational site on the dangers of information sharing, but the danger it points to hasn't gone away. I try to be careful to not post that I'm away from home, but rather post when I return home about the great trip I just took. Smart watches make it possible to share in real time where we are and what we're doing. But, they all seem to require you to actively share that information (don't do it).

The additional information gathered by some of these products could also be used in ways that you don't intend. What if insurance companies, or the government, had a record of your exercise patterns, your heartrate around the clock, or how much you're perspiring in different circumstances? That might be valuable information for them, but it might also be used against you. Again, be careful how you share this information.

As Jesus warned "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles." (Matthew 10:16-18)

It is my hope and prayer that these articles on the power and danger of technology will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. Whether it is smart watches, the printing press, radio, television, personal computers, the Internet, the Cloud, smartphones, or augmented reality, new technologies continue to advance our ability to know God and to serve Him, wherever we go.

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is CX-friends (http://cxfriends.com), a social network for Christian families which is being built and run by four homeschooled students under Russ' direction.