Accessories for iPod: To the tune of $300m

Huge market grows with music player

By John P. Mello Jr., Globe Correspondent  |  December 12, 2005

As if the iPod isn't cool enough by itself.

The little mobile wonderbox from Apple is striving to be the anchor of your personal entertainment toy department, pushing video to your TV, cueing the slide show of your vacation, ginning up music on the house sound system or in your ride, and giving you Teri Hatcher and her desperate gal friends on the go.

A rich ecosystem has taken root around the iPod, fed by a dizzying array of accessories -- more than 1,000 -- that extend the reach and versatility of the device well beyond its native form as an already impressive mobile music and video player.

"It's emerging as a content-foraging device," said Michael McGuire, a research director for the Gartner Group in Stamford, Conn.

There are docking stations and cables that link the iPod to a home stereo and TV; portable speakers that turn it into a boom box on the run; FM transmitters that pipe the audio library through a car radio. Even drivers with vintage cassette players can buy an adapter to bridge to the iPod world.

Wireless remotes and wireless headphones untether listeners from tangling cables and fixed locations. Voice recorders memorialize great thoughts and to-do lists. Camera links make the iPod a photo album, dispensing with those pesky little memory cards.

The iPod accessories market has become a powerhouse in its own right, to the tune of more than $300 million annually, and sales of such products are growing faster, on a percentage basis, than the device itself, said Gavin Downey, a director of product management at accessory maker Belkin Corp., in Compton, Calif.

In the early days of the iPod, he noted, there was a relatively low "attach rate" from the unit. For every 15 to 20 iPods sold, one unit of accessories moved. Today, it's almost a one-to-one ratio.

Cases remain one of the most robust segments of the accessory market. Most sell in the $20 to $40 range, but for fashion watchers, tony accessory maker Coach crafts an upscale line of iPod sheaths capped by one made from imported Python for $178.

Ear pads, ear buds, and headphones come in a wide range of types and prices, from...
Nike's Flight Lightweight Sport Headphones at $19.95 to Shure's E3C Sound Isolating Earphones at $179.95. The Shure phones use a sound isolating technology developed for professional musicians -- that blocks out ambient sound so listeners don't have to crank up the volume on their iPods in noisy places like subway stations.

Docking stations and related devices offer to unleash podders from their ear buds, and propel the future of the iPod.

The iHome Clock Radio Dock ($99.99), for example, is just what it sounds like: a bedside broadcaster that wakes you up with tunes from the iPod or the radio.

Even speaker standout Bose has been attracted to the iPod. Its SoundDock Digital Music System ($299.99) produces big sound from the diminutive music player and will charge the iPod as it airs its tunes.

And then there are gadgets to integrate the Apple into home entertainment systems like the Xitell HiFi-Link ($99.95), which will not only send music from an iPod to a home entertainment system but video, too.

"If you spend so much time getting it right on your iPod, why wouldn't you want to integrate that device with your home stereo system?" said Ben Davis, vice president for product development for the Canberra, Australia-based company.

Davis sees the iPod as a lynchpin for breaking down what has been an impenetrable silo for computer devices -- the living room. "Because of Apple's marketing, people already feel comfortable with the iPod and connecting it to a computer and listening to audio," he said. "So it won't be a far step to take that and integrate it into a high-end home environment in the living room."

That step, though, will require more than repackaging a computer and adding the word media to its name, added McGuire, of Gartner. "If Apple's going to do something, it's got to be something cool," he said. "It can't make just something else you can throw on your rack."

Outside the house, the iPod is more mobile than ever, with accessories that turn a car stereo into an adjunct sound system for your iTunes. There are numerous FM transmitters in the market. But a favorite of many iPod owners is the iTrip ($29.95), by Griffin Technologies of Nashville. Not only does the device perform well, but its design meshes with the iPod's in a pleasing way.

One problem with the FM transmitters, though, is they can drain an iPod's battery. That's why choosing a transmitter that plugs into an auto charger has its advantages, especially for heavy users of an iPod in a car. Both Griffin and Kensington make transmitter/chargers that sell for $79.95.

Hammon Kardon takes the concept a step further. Its Drive + Play product ($199) includes a display that mirrors the iPod's and can be mounted on a dashboard giving drivers more convenient control over the music player.

A low-tech alternative to FM transmitters are cassette adapters. They plug into an iPod's headphone jack and play its music through an auto's cassette tape player. Griffin has figured out a way to control some of the iPod's functions through the adapter.

Its SmartDeck ($29.95), which works only with iPods with dock connectors, lets you use a cassette player's forward and rewind buttons to skip to next or previous songs on the iPod and its stop and pause controls perform those functions on the Apple device.

For the best sound from an iPod in a car, it's hard to beat a radio with a built-in interface for the music player, like the Kenwood KDC-MP428 ($179.99) and the Alpine CDA-9853 ($349.99).

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