

Google Glass sees all -- and that raises privacy concerns

Google Glass could be the next must-have gadget if the company can allay privacy fears and overcome its label as a 'Segway for your face.'

[...] Glass won't be widely available for purchase until early next year, but it's one of the most anticipated new technologies in years. The question many are asking: Can Google make digital goggles the world's next must-have gadget?

As Google sees it, Glass is a revolutionary new way to quickly and effortlessly connect people with information.

Critics view Glass as an invasive new technology that — if it takes off — could rob people of what few shreds of privacy they have left.

Lawmakers are alarmed by the privacy implications and have begun asking pointed questions of Google. And some commercial establishments — most notably casinos and bars — have already banned Glass.

Google is downplaying the privacy and security risks, assuring the public that it will not permit facial recognition apps. Google says it's obvious when someone is taking pictures or recording a video on Glass.

But some developers have already built a way to get around Google: an alternative operating system that runs on Glass but is not controlled by Google. One developer is making a facial recognition app that will help users remember the hundreds of people they have met and should recognize but don't. That in-your-face quality of Glass could wake up more people to their ever shrinking privacy in the rapidly advancing digital age, University of Washington law professor Ryan Calo said.

Not only will people be more keenly aware that they have no reasonable expectation of privacy in public, Glass and devices like it could make it easier for government authorities to gain access to everything they see and record without a warrant, he said.

And, with a warrant, the government might even be able to remotely turn on Glass' video recording capability without the user's knowledge, the way it has done with OnStar systems in cars, Calo said.

To counter that kind of growing apprehension, Google is trying to make the new technology seem as normal as possible.

Google co-founder Sergey Brin constantly has a pair perched on his nose. He has worn Glass to the Oscars, to the TED conference, in the Hollywood film "The Internship," and last year he stole the show at Google's annual developers conference by sky-diving onto the roof wearing Glass.

His cohort, Google Chief Executive and co-founder Larry Page, recently sported a pair as a groomsman in a wedding ceremony in Croatia. And he talked up Glass as the future of technology during Google's second-quarter earnings conference call with analysts.

Still, even inside the high-tech industry, some aren't too keen on Glass. Los Angeles technology entrepreneur and investor Jason Calacanis has asked friends to remove Glass in his presence, banned Glass from poker games and coined a new term to describe what he feels like doing when he spots Glass wearers: "Glass-kicking."

And Glass hasn't been able to ditch what could be its true Achilles' heel: its dorky image. Labeled "Segway for your face," it has become the butt of jokes on late-night television and on the Internet. Not only have Glass wearers been subjected to public ridicule for looking "glassed out," they are referred to as a cross between Glass and a curse word.

Google is the first to admit that Glass is not quite ready for prime time, with widely reported

glitches. The battery drains quickly (but also charges quickly). The capabilities are still very limited, with only a smattering of apps such as Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr.

Perhaps the most glaring omission: A way for the 64% of the U.S. population who wears glasses to use Glass. Google has made a prototype of prescription frames designed to be compatible with Glass and said the company will release specifications for frames manufacturers.

"We still have bumps in the road and obstacles," Glass product director Steve Lee said. "Right now, you need to be an early adopter who is excited about the technology." [...]

Over the last three years, Google has dramatically refined Glass. The latest incarnation weighs about the same as a pair of normal glasses and is more attractive and less obtrusive. Google chose a marketing strategy as novel as Glass. This summer, it opened three upscale pop-up stores that it calls "basecamps" — in a San Francisco office tower on the waterfront, in a penthouse in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York and in Google's Venice Beach offices — to give thousands the white-glove treatment as they are outfitted with Glass.

This shopping experience is even more exclusive than most. Explorers not only stretched their pocketbooks to be the first to test Google's \$1,500 device, they competed in an online contest for the privilege (#ifihadglass contest).

"This is a big, new leap in tech, and I think it's really important to get feedback on product and how people use it. Why would you do that in a vacuum, when you can do it with people across the United States?" said Ed Sanders, Google's head of marketing for Glass. "When you are inventing something new and something that by its very nature is very intimate and personal, a device that someone wears on his or her face, then you have to listen to people." [...]

One by one, guides deliver white boxes with the silver Glass logo. Inside the box under a single sheet of white filmy paper is Glass. The guides custom fit the lens-less glasses, bending the titanium and adjusting the nose guards.

The explorers drink chilled champagne and craft beer as they slide their fingers back and forth along the right side of the device and stare into a screen the size of a postage stamp above their right eye. Soon they are ordering Glass around with ease, dictating messages to family and friends and making plans to take Glass sightseeing, even hang-gliding.

Erica Pang, 24, who works for a Palo Alto start-up, and her brother Aaron Pang, 20, a junior at Washington University recovering from spinal lymphoma, entered the #ifihadglass contest. She was picked. Their idea: to broadcast live virtual field trips to museums and zoos for children who are immobilized by illness or stuck in hospital beds. They got the idea when Aaron spent three months in the hospital.

"We want to let kids see the world without any of their limitations getting in the way," Erica Pang said.

Michael Kendle, an app developer from Springfield, Miss., in flip-flops and jeans and lounging on a gray couch at the Google basecamp, is a self-professed gadget junkie and says he always has to be the first to get the new, new thing. Now he has Glass, and he says he plans never to take it off except to shower and sleep.

"I love being connected to everything, to have all this information at my fingertips," Kendle said.

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