

# The Future of Wearables Is Beautifully Designed

When chipmaker Intel and fashion house Opening Ceremony teamed up to create a wearable-technology product, odds were good that the outcome would be ugly.

If not ugly, then clunky. Or bulky. Or just simply uncomfortable. The list of adjectives used to describe the less-than-appealing design of wearables was already long, so there was no reason to expect that this latest tech-fashion collaboration would produce anything different.

*While awareness of wearables is quite high, adoption remains relatively low.*

But the “MICA”—short for “My Intelligent Communication Accessory”—a high-fashion cuff bracelet with a touchscreen display on which wearers can access texts, calendar items and other notifications, is the first wearable to be widely considered fashionable enough for someone to want to wear whether they leverage its connected capabilities or not. That’s because the design process was not a traditional cross-brand collaboration whereby Intel built the gadget and then slapped on the logo or other recognizable detail from a well-known fashion brand and called it a wearable. Rather, it was a back-and-forth between the two companies that gave as much, if not more, weight to the form as it did to the function.

It’s an approach that was very purposeful on the part of Intel, which has embarked on similar projects with brands ranging from Fossil (for smartwatches) to SMS Audio (for smart earbuds). As Mike Bell, who as Intel’s head of new devices is tasked with overseeing its wearables initiative, was quoted by *Forbes* as saying, “If you work really hard at it, you can design something that’s elegant, fashionable ... and does something great for you.”

With the MICA, which also includes its own 3G cellular radio and USB charging port,

Intel and Opening Ceremony have given the market a wearable that is both beautiful and useful. At the same time, they have offered apparel and accessories makers a blueprint for how to take wearables from the niche nice-to-have category to that of must-have for the masses by working side by side with a tech company to marry form and function so seamlessly that the form is also able to stand on its own. It’s a blueprint that apparel and accessories makers need to now take and run with, especially since, for those struggling to find a revenue growth engine, wearables are one of the brightest lights on the horizon.

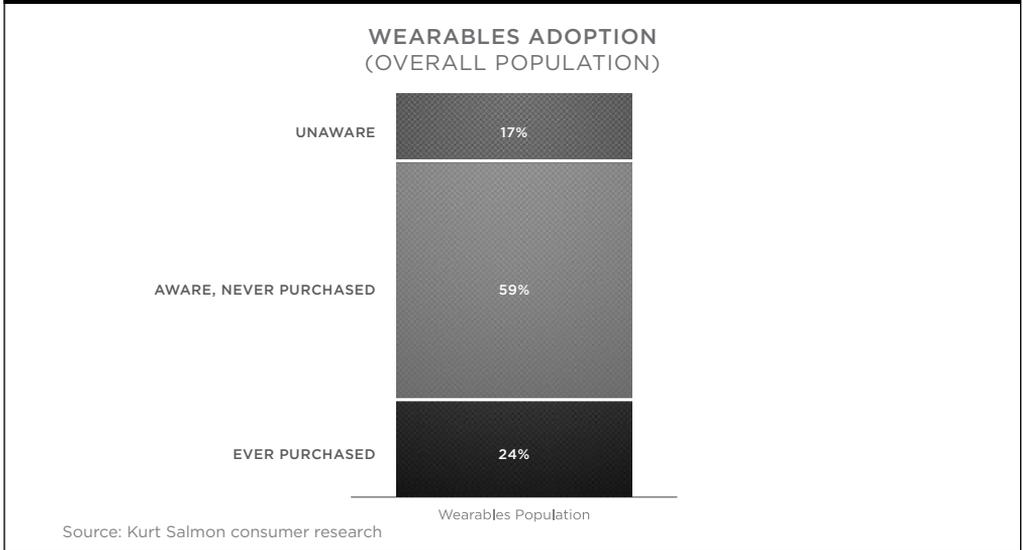
### **The Gap Between Niche and Mass**

While awareness of wearables is quite high, adoption remains relatively low. Among respondents to a survey conducted by Kurt Salmon, 83% indicated they knew that wearables existed, but just 24% said they’d ever purchased one.

Of those respondents who said they were aware of wearables but had yet to purchase one,



**EXHIBIT 1: Just 24% of survey respondents have ever purchased a wearable.**



excessive price and lack of need were the two most oft-cited reasons why—as is typical with any new product category, particularly one rooted in technology.

Putting those aside, what emerged was that the real barrier to purchase was form: Wearables were seen as some combination of too bulky, obtrusive/conspicuous or just flat-out unfashionable/lacking style.

Indeed, as Intel’s Ayse Ildeniz, spokesperson for the chipmaker’s new fashion initiative, told Style.com, currently “99% of wearables

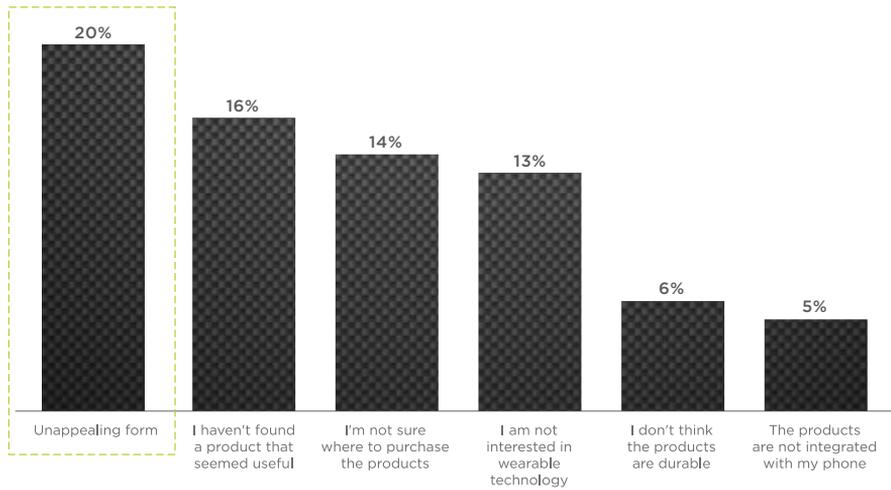
are geared toward the Silicon Valley male.” So, they’re functional, but far from beautiful.

### How to Bridge the Gap

Not all apparel and accessories makers will opt to get into the wearables business, but it would be foolish to think that the category will never find its wings. This is not a passing fad; the potential of wearables is simply too great. For those not opting to create wearables, their management teams will at the very least need to invest in understanding how the wearables category will impact them.

**EXHIBIT 2: Respondents say the top reason for not purchasing wearables, other than price and lack of need, is form.**

**NON-TRIAL REASONS  
(PERCENTAGE SELECTING, NON-PURCHASERS)**



Source: Kurt Salmon consumer research

As for those apparel and accessories makers who do want to produce wearables, they should start by appointing a C-level executive to sponsor the initiative because it has the potential to quickly become a significant growth engine and, as such, will require significant changes to the company's overall strategy and related operational infrastructure and processes. Driven by the Internet of

Things, the projected growth trajectory of wearables is akin to that of omnichannel, which is now at the core of every retailer's strategy but in the beginning consisted of little more than the e-commerce website most retailers added only as an afterthought. And as an entirely new category of product, the design of wearables requires an entirely new approach.

To start, apparel and accessories makers need to identify technology companies whose vision for wearables matches their own. Some tech firms are determined to go it alone, while others see value in simply adding an apparel or accessories brand's logo to something they have otherwise solely created. Both approaches miss the point—and, ultimately, the opportunity—of wearables. (And the latter approach moreover misreads the values of the younger generation, for whom brand identifiers are to be minimized, not flaunted.)

A traditional collaboration process may not be ideal when it comes to designing wearables. The danger is that in trying to adhere to traditional ways of doing things, the creativity needed to design a product in such a nascent category could be inadvertently suffocated. So an innovation lab-like approach may prove more fruitful.

What matters most is that both sides come to the table with their own distinctive worldview. With the MICA, for example, the designers at Opening Ceremony, seeking a luxurious feel, reportedly wanted a metal band, but as the engineers at Intel rightly pointed out, a cuff made entirely of metal would hamper the technological functions.



Whereas the oval shape of the band was said to be Opening Ceremony's call, Intel, according to *Fast Company*, had initially designed it to be square.

Bringing together such opposing perspectives to create the wearable, however, was precisely the point. "As a tech company," Intel's Bell told CNET, "we're not so arrogant as to think we know what the end user will want."

Put another way: Designing wearables is akin to creating chemical synthesis, whereby two different compounds are purposefully mixed in order to create an entirely new product, one with unique properties all its own.

### **The Future of Wearables Is Beautifully Designed**

The promise of wearable-technology products is the enhancement of the wearer's everyday life through additional knowledge and communication by leveraging the most valuable real estate of all: the wearer's own body.

## Increasingly Beautiful

MICA may have been the first wearable whose form was declared beautiful enough to stand on its own, but it's not the only one; many more have followed. Here's just a sampling of what can happen when tech and fashion companies collaborate to innovate.

### TORY BURCH FOR FITBIT

Fitbit's Flex tracker is housed in a line of elegant brass bracelets and pendant necklaces that show off Tory Burch's signature stylings.

### GEAR S

A collaboration between Samsung and Diesel's Black Gold division yielded these beautiful smartwatches.

### GOOGLE GLASS BY DVF

If anyone could make Google Glass beautiful, it was Diane von Furstenberg.



But as the rave reviews of the MICA make clear, until the form matches—if not surpasses—the functionality, that promise will remain inherently limited.

As Opening Ceremony creative director Humberto Leon told *Fast Company* of his company’s approach to designing the MICA, the goal was to come up with something that made a statement but didn’t scream technology—something, in other words, that a person would want to wear every day.

“The idea of this is that it’s something you want to own and people might look at it and say, ‘Beautiful bracelet!’ And you never mention that it has functionality to it. That’s the owner’s personal choice.”

And in order to give them that choice, apparel and accessories makers need to find those tech companies who share that vision, then work side by side with them to marry form and function so seamlessly that the form is also able to stand on its own. ❖

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