

Waterproof gadgets make a splash at Berlin tech fair

BERLIN: From smartphones that can survive a dip in the sink to sweat-resistant earphones and floating speakers for your next pool party, waterproof gadgets are making a splash at this year's IFA electronics fair in Berlin.



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As consumers have grown more attached to their on-the-go devices, they have also become more demanding and manufacturers have been working for years to make those products, phones especially, better able to withstand sudden downpours, spills or even the dreaded toilet-bowl plunge.

New consumer demand

"The smartphone is now omnipresent and constantly in use, and a lot can happen. So its waterproof capabilities have become a lot more important," said Timm Lutter of the German hi-tech federation Bitkom.

When Japanese electronics giant Sony unveiled its latest handset, the Xperia XZ, at the week-long tech extravaganza on Thursday, it touted the phone's water resistance by showing it from behind a liquid-spattered screen. A day earlier, Samsung showed off its new Gear S3 smartwatch, which like its Galaxy S7 phone can easily cope with a dunk. Apple's iPhone 7, to be launched this week, is also widely expected to feature improved water resistance.

"It's a consumer demand, a selling point, a way to stand out," said Jean-Raoul de Gelis, head of Sony Mobile France. But

given the complexities of designing water-resistant devices, de Gelis said it was an add-on reserved for high-end products only. "You have to work on sealing each protrusion, the screen, all the connector ports, and technically they are much more complex products to manufacture," he told AFP.

It's not just smartphones and smartwatches that are focusing on becoming more water-friendly. Makers of sports gadgets have long taken the plunge, with cameras like the all-terrain GoPro, headphones and MP3 music players that you can take swimming already widely available.

Japan's JVC Kenwood displayed a range of sweat- and splash-proof sports headphones at the IFA gathering, as well as a small camcorder that can be safely submerged at a depth of up to five metres and can withstand dust and extreme temperatures. "It's a family product, it needs to work in all situations," said Guillaume Briot, head of the firm's French marketing division, referring to the new generation Everio camera.

Buyers beware

But buyers beware! Just because a gadget promises some level of splash resistance, it doesn't mean it can survive all submerged activities. Samsung's advertisement for the Galaxy S7 for instance shows a man who absentmindedly drops his phone in the sink while doing the dishes, a submersion lasting just a few moments. "We're not saying that this is an under-water device," Guillaume Berlemont, marketing director of mobile products at Samsung France, told AFP.

And while tech products are getting better at coping with water, some companies have been reluctant to highlight those capabilities, fearing consumers will misunderstand how far they can take it, said IHS technology analyst Ian Fogg. Firms that do choose to market their products as such must consider how they will manage customer returns if the devices end up suffering water damage, he said. "Is it something that is due to a fault in manufacturing or is it because (the) consumer has used the phone in a way that goes beyond the official rating?"

Water-resistant products generally come with an IP68 rating, meaning they can handle being submerged for up to half an hour, at a depth of more than one metre. Enough to withstand rain and accidental splashes or immersions, but not enough to survive being left at the bottom of a pool. "There is a lot of work to do in terms of educating consumers. It's not easy," said Sony's de Grelis.

Some waterproof gadgets are of course designed to be dabbled with playfully, as demonstrated by Vern Smith, head of business development at Monster Products, who entertained visitors at the trade show by tossing a black, wireless speaker into a bowl of water. It quickly resurfaced, spat out a few drops and then resumed blasting out music, while gently floating on the water's surface.

Source: AFP