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We Are The Jettsons

I must confess that my imagination refuses to see any sort of submarine doing anything but suffocating its crew and floundering at sea.—H.G. Wells

By the sound of the quote above it seems that the great futurist, H. G. Wells, grappled with the changes that modern technology wrought upon society. It is somehow reassuring to know that even Wells had difficulty digesting the future, as it puts me in good company when I find myself struggling to keep pace with evolving technology.

As a member of the “Boomer” generation, compared to the technology available today, often I am reminded just how “primitive” the technology of my youth was by comparison. The list of things that did not exist back in that “Leave It to Beaver” era in which I grew up, but are now necessary tools of my daily life, is staggering. Computers, cell phones, PDAs, and even electronic calculators, are only a partial list of those things that I have subsumed into my daily routine and on which I greatly rely.

Why am I waxing on about yesterday's technology in comparison to what is available today? The reason is due to a recent field trip I took to the International CTIA Wireless tradeshow, the annual tradeshow for all things mobile and wireless. Billed as “one of the largest technology events in the

World,” I was curious to see what inroads licensing has made into this high tech, and yes, geek laden industry.

There are obvious uses of intellectual property in the mobile/wireless industry: phone games, wallpaper, and even ring tones are a few product examples of the blending of IP materials and technology. And before someone screams the word “Patents” at this point, thinking I am clueless as to how rife patents are in the mobile/wireless industry, accept the fact that I don't do patents; deal with it.

Having never attended the CTIA tradeshow, I had no idea what I would find on the show floor that related to the world of licensing, except those few products I noted above. I was surprised to learn that there was greater use of IP materials than I had expected to find among the myriad of booths filled with products and services that I had not a clue as to what they did. Several times I made the mistake of stopping at a booth with particularly interesting looking “stuff” and inquiring as to exactly what their stuff did. Often, after receiving an ardent explanation I walked away oblivious as to what in the world their product did or why anyone needed it.

There is no question that the greatest use of IP materials was in the accessories' category. Most popular were those items that either cover or hug your phone; there is a difference. Covers commonly refer

to products that can be taken on and off your phone. These products come in a variety of styles, materials and price points, and run the gambit from inexpensive to lavish, and from practical/functional to you've-got-to-be-kidding. There is a relatively new product category called “skins” that are quickly gaining popularity. Unlike a cover, skins are more like decals, but are tailored to fit specific phone models, adhering to both the back and front (non-working surfaces) of a phone. Skins offer very little protection, and can be easily peeled off and replaced on a whim or when you realize that what was hip is no longer and you need to re-trend your seriously outdated skin before anyone notices. My Blackberry Tour is now wrapped in luxuriant beige faux ostrich...

Additional mobile phone and PDA accessories I found that used licensed images included many forms of the phone dangle. Thanks to the Far East, it is becoming increasingly more popular here to hang little thingies on your phone. In this product category the clear winners are those properties where “cute” is the primary appeal. From what I witnessed, it looks like this also is trending male; the clear favorite are those dangles that declares a person's team sports preference and specific team loyalty.

There were some clever new products I bumped into, one I particularly liked was something called the “Phubby Wrist Cubby.” I won't make you guess what a Phubby is. It is an item that claims to have conquered “this millennium's greatest challenge;” which according to the product's manufacturer is how to conveniently carry your cell phone. Personally, I thought perhaps a cure to cancer was the right answer, but you have to admit there is something to Phubby's claim. How many

phumbles (Phubby-speak for a phone fumble) have you experienced trying to locate your phone before it stops ringing? With a Phubby the problem is solved as your phone is located in its own little comfy pouch affixed to a wristband you wear; think kangaroo with the security of a Velcro closing pouch meets wristband.

Phubby is licensing friendly, as images—from characters and team logos to designer names—can be silkscreened directly on its pouch and/or wristband area. I should mention that this item is made of a material you can see through affording you the ease of answering you phone even when it is safely sequestered in its cocoon. The drawback to using your phone in this fashion, given it is hidden from view, is quite frankly you run the risk of looking like a moron who is having a conversation with his hand.

In the mobile/wireless industry more challenging is the integration of IP material, when used as a core component, with either software or hardware. Irrespective of a property's derivation, to insure successful application of a licensed property for either use, the property must be germane to the functionality of the product; label-slap will not work here. The most successful pairing of licensing with technology occurs when the relationship between these two disparate components are both logical and appear almost seamless.

A perfect example of an excellent marriage between licensing and technology in the mobile/

wireless industry is the pairing of the Simpson's license and GPS technology. The resulting product is an application that will replace the perfunctory voice track, common to most all GPS products, with the voice of Homer Simpson. In my opinion, the outcome is a product that meets the test of being both logical and seamless. The replacement of the mechanical voice track with that of Homer, transforms the average GPS unit into something that provides the same quality of service, but in a more enjoyable form. The product is proof that with the continued sophistication of technology the licensing industry is provided increased licensing opportunities; the ability to tap into product categories, which until recently was almost exclusively license-free.

Walking by the Wild Charge I noticed a number of black pads in various sizes, each with varying numbers of electronic devices lying on the pads. What also caught my attention was that one of the pads was labeled with a popular battery band name. I inquired as to the purpose of product, and why one featured a battery band mark. The item was a charging pad for hand-held devices. Products such as cell phones, PDAs, and MP3 players, depending on their model, could be recharged simply by placing the item on the charging pad. Compatibility could be achieved by placement of a small special pad to the back of those devices not compatible with the pad. But why did one pad featured the use

of a popular battery name? The reason I was told was that use of a well known battery instead of the manufacture's name might attract more sales.

With little expectation that I would find any significant use of licensing in at the CTIA Show, I was surprised by how pervasive licensing was within the mobile and wireless industry. This realization also reminded me of just how important it is, regardless of the product category, to stay abreast of change. As H.G. Wells said, "The past is the beginning of the beginning and all that is and has been is but the twilight of the dawn."

So, why the reason for this column's title, "We Are The Jettsons"? It is the realization that except for his nifty little jet car, we are living in the George Jettson age. Phones no larger than a pack of cigarettes that provide instant communication around the world, untethered paper sized devices with myriad of uses that allow productivity no matter where you happen to be, or immediate access to a plethora of information with no more effort than the typing of a few keys. From my "boomer" generation perspective the future has arrived. Happily, I am pleased to report that the expansion of technology provides new applications for licensing.

Wishing you Happy Licensing!

Danny Simon, president and CEO of The Licensing Group, Ltd., is one of the industry's premiere innovators and foreign licensing experts.

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