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STRATEGIES

Apple's Watch Is Smarter, but My Casio Keeps Getting the Job Done

By Jeff Sommer

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IPhones haven't been selling particularly well, Apple reported this summer, but its watches are becoming wildly popular. And no wonder.

The Apple Watch is elegant, versatile and frequently gains new powers. It can track the distance you run, measure the noise you hear on the street, record your heartbeat, play your favorite tune and place a phone call. (Yes, it can even tell time.)

New models of the watch, and of the iPhone, are expected in September. How they fare in the marketplace will help to determine whether Apple continues to be one of the most valuable companies in the world.

But impressive though the constantly updated Apple Watch may be, I don't wear one, at least not yet. Instead, I'm sticking with a classic Casio. In its own modest way, it is a marvel, too.

Casio says my spare, black, monochromatic watch will operate smoothly for at least seven years without needing a battery charge. And the Casio watch is uncannily accurate. It doesn't gain or lose more than three minutes in an entire year.

Perhaps most important, it is astonishingly cheap, a claim that I wouldn't make for any Apple product. The F-91W Casio that I wear has a list price of \$18.95; I bought it for less than \$11. A slightly more elaborate sport watch, the DW-290 favored by the special counsel Robert S. Mueller III and his deputies, can be bought for about \$35.

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Those are bargain-basement prices compared with the \$279 to \$1,499 that Apple charges for the current models of its watch.

In this era of rampant planned obsolescence, the Casio watch remains a remarkable outlier: a once-advanced device that has been available for a quarter-century and still does exactly what it was designed to do.

Still, my Casio is limited in what it can do: It is just a watch. Basically, it reports the time, date and day of the week, and functions as a little alarm clock and as a stopwatch. Press a button and it lights up in the dark. I've worn it in the shower, in swimming pools and in the ocean, although such behavior isn't recommended. The watch isn't guaranteed to survive immersion.

Sturdy as it is, the watch won't last forever. You can replace the battery and the plastic resin watch band, but I've found that doing so can be tedious. Since Casio introduced the F-91W in 1989, I've owned several, and some of its cousins, which date to the 1970s. Casio called them technological "miracles" back then. It is their continued availability at reasonable prices, not their aging technology, that makes them minor miracles today.

Replacing the originals was my choice over the decades; it wasn't forced on me by Casio.

"Repairing devices is better for the planet than buying new ones," said Kyle Wiens, a founder of iFixit, a website with do-it-yourself manuals and other resources geared toward teaching "people how to fix almost anything." Mr. Wiens contrasted Casio, which makes battery replacement a straightforward if delicate task, with companies like Apple, which directs consumers to the company's own stores or certified technicians.

"These companies are deliberately making it more difficult for people to repair their devices," he said. "And they push people to replace existing devices that work perfectly well. That's planned obsolescence."

Michael Waldman, a Cornell University economics professor, expanded on that idea.

"I would define 'planned obsolescence' as the practice of coming out with innovations more quickly than is efficient from the standpoint of social welfare," he said. "For a company, it's a way of maximizing profits, perhaps at some cost to consumer welfare." By that definition, he said, Apple is engaging in planned obsolescence, while Casio is not.

Consider what will most likely happen in the fall, when Apple introduces new operating systems. The company says iPhones that can handle that update will be able to operate in "dark mode." That should cut back on emissions of light and, perhaps, ease eye strain.

I'd like to use dark mode but I can't, unless I reach for my wallet. That's because my iPhone 6, and older iPhones, won't be compatible with iOS 13, the forthcoming version of Apple's operating system. Owners of older iPads will be in a similar predicament. And owners of new Apple Watches but older iPhones won't be able to update their watches unless they get a newer phone.

How bad will this be for consumers? In an email, Apple said, "We work hard to provide our users with exciting new features every year while maintaining performance," adding that "this is a difficult challenge, and at some point we need to stop updating older devices so we maintain a good

user experience with strong performance.” Even for those older devices, the company said that it would issue security updates it deemed critical “on a case-by-case basis.”

If you've got an older Apple device, though, at some point it won't be able to do everything it does now. I've experienced that with an older iPad Mini. Eventually, I found that it could no longer display all of the news reports to which I subscribed, and I replaced it. That will probably happen with my iPhone 6.

As I wrote last year, I've only been able to hold onto the phone this long because of a battery replacement program that Apple instituted after reports that it was throttling the speeds of older devices. The company is being sued by people who accuse it of deliberately shortening the working life of its products. Apple denies the accusations.

These days, in an effort to encourage purchases of new phones, Apple is buying back older iPhones that it refurbishes and resells, often to people living outside the United States.

Is it coincidental that just as iPhone sales have stalled, Apple is effectively pushing people like me into buying new phones? Maybe. But using multiple levers — style shifts, marketing and changes in functional design — to persuade consumers to replace products is an effective and longstanding strategy.

That's not true for just Apple, but for other technology companies, carmakers and razor blade and clothing manufacturers. Planned obsolescence has been practiced for decades but it has been elevated into a corporate art form lately.

That's why it seems to me that simply creating good, inexpensive products that rarely need to be replaced has become an extraordinary accomplishment. Yet Casio, whose sales have been flagging, doesn't boast about its practices. The company declined to comment for this column.

The stock market favors Apple's approach, not Casio's. In the five years through Wednesday, Casio's share price has dropped more than 20 percent. The price of Apple stock has more than doubled in that time.

Daniel A. Levinthal, a professor of corporate strategy at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, said: “Given a choice, most companies would rather be in the position of Apple, which has been innovating and successfully developing new products and bringing them to market and getting consumers to buy them — than in the position of Casio, which has been much less successful at that, even if it is selling some fine products.”

That makes the retro Casio watch even more special. It doesn't belong entirely to this time.

Correction: Aug. 23, 2019

An earlier version of this column misstated when the Casio F-91W was introduced. It was 1989, not 1991.

Follow Jeff Sommer on Twitter: [@jeffsommer](https://twitter.com/jeffsommer).

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