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Has the PDA become a Fossil?

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One way to avoid having electronic information fall into the wrong hands is to keep it attached to the right hand(s). That's one of the security benefits of the Wrist PDA introduced by Fossil at last week's Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

Fossil teamed up with PalmSource to offer a watch-based PDA, powered by Palm OS 4.1. While the consumer launch stressed fashion and functionality rather than directly addressing security -- an ongoing and expected theme at CES -- the Wrist PDA has many of the security features of handheld PDAs.

According to Frank Romero, Fossil's director of watch technology products, Palm OS 4.1 incorporates security features such as password encryption and auto lock in sleep mode.

The Wrist PDA's layout differs from a Palm-powered device, not surprising considering everything must fit unto a one-inch, EL backlight, 16-level grayscale touch screen.

Romero insists that writing on the Wrist PDA is not dramatically different. "Palm OS has a graffiti scribble area that is actually smaller than one inch square," Romero said. "We give as much space -- you're just writing on your wrist instead."

The Wrist PDA uses SecurID from RSA Security, a two-factor authentication system safeguard that combines wearer-known information such as a password or PIN with something the wearer of the Watch PDA has that provides dynamic user authentication. To guard corporate networks, users can authenticate Palm Powered devices by Flash ID, Mobile Access Number and Electronic Serial Number.

PalmSource said available add-in software programs offer higher levels of security, including on-device data encryption, and data self-destruct that will wipe the memory of the device if there's an unauthorized intrusion.

The Wrist PDA includes 8MB of RAM and 4MB of flash memory. Fossil includes an address book, date book, to-do list, memo pad, calculator, time, and says it will run most Palm OS applications. It is also Windows and Mac OSX compatible, and can beam data to another Palm mobile devices via the infrared port, USB HotSync (R) support for Mac OS and Windows.

The lithium-ion rechargeable battery can last for three to four days based on an average use of 30 minutes per day, with no backlight or infrared communications. The battery life varies depending on the temperature and conditions of use, and can be recharged with the included AC adapter.

While it may seem logical to think that the Wrist PDA is less likely to be stolen because it is attached to the user, that attachment could lead to one other loss-of-data concern -- damage. The Wrist PDA is not water-resistant and should not be allowed to get damp. Water can leak in and damage internal components. Could this also lead to the device being left behind in the rest room?

From a fashion-only standpoint, the Wrist PDA is available in two different brands, Fossil and Abacus. The Fossil 's version retails for about $250. The Abacus version, available exclusively through Tiger Direct, sells for around $200.

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