

The Sony Walkman

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INTRODUCTION

Why a design classic is a design classic? Is a question that has to be approached from different ways in order to make all the components, put them together and, finally, build the answer.

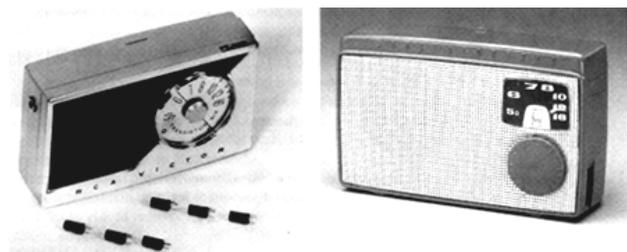
To study a design classic one should at least explore about its history, what was the need that has to be fulfilled at that moment, which was the role of technology in the first stages of development, was it a new product or an improvement of an existing one? which was the design policy of the manufacturer?, what was the context of the design decisions?, explore the evolution of the actual design, how was and how it is marketed?, and, finally, what uses and meanings it generated and continues generating in the present moment?.

Paul du Gay introduces in his book 'doing cultural studies' the circuit of culture. It is a theoretical model based on the articulation of distinct processes in order to study any cultural text or artefact, exploring how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and, what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use. The book illustrates the development of these processes and how they articulate analysing the Sony Walkman as an example.

The purpose of this essay is to analyse and illustrate why the Sony Walkman has become a design classic combining both methods of analysis in order to underline key points that will answer the question stated at the beginning. Several books, documents and articles have been consulted and they are listed in the bibliography at the end.

First the History of the Sony Walkman from the development of transistors until its launch in 1979 is recreated, then the design policy of the Sony corporation and its design decisions are analysed and explored followed by describing the facts that has caused some influence in the shape and functions of the Walkman, and finally, two sections in which some key marketing concepts are taken into account (market research and public relations) and which meanings has the Walkman generated and continue generating in the present time.

HISTORY



By the 1920's clear, good - quality sounds, free from distortion, could be heard from radios around the world. Early radio was most popular in the United States and Europe, where listeners were entertained in their own armchairs with big band music, exciting plays and live outside broadcasts of sports and national events.

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Radio became an important feature of every day life. The first popular radios were made with large valves and other bulky components. They were housed in a box, which because of its size, became an important feature within the home. The radio had to look attractive and match the taste and style of its owners. Changes in radio design were influenced by developments in the arts, science and industry. New materials, new processes and new technology were used to create radios and other type of equipment which offered improved quality and choice of styles for the consumer.

Valves were replaced by transistors and radios became smaller. The original wooden box was replaced by a moulded plastic unit and a variety of shapes and colours.

In 1947 the Western Electric division of AT&T in the United States made the first transistorised electronic components, this was a small amplification device that used semi - conductors. AT&T engineers thought that these devices were only useful for hearing aids. Hence through the United States regulatory anti trust system, licenses were granted to the small Japanese company who wished to acquire the rights, and Mr Morita and Mr Ibuka from the newly named company, Sony, did in 1952 for US\$ 25.000.

Having purchased the rights to the transistor, the Sony company set to work and within two years it had demonstrated that these transistors did indeed have more applications than their use for producing hearing aids. In 1950 Sony produced the first tape recorder, the following year the corporation fitted it into a suitcase, there by turning it into a portable model for domestic use. In 1954 Sony produced the first transistor radio and by 1957 it had been miniaturised to fit into a pocket.

The development of transistors in the 1950's, followed by the microchip in the 1980's have made possible such an extreme reduction in size of among other products, radios, tape recorders and calculators for example. The Japanese historical obsession for reductionism, i.e. bonsai and haiku, was 'set free' and extrapolated to their consumer electronic goods by the rising technologies.

Launched in 1979, the Sony Walkman has long since passed into legend. Mismamed (in the view of Sony's cofounder and former chairman, Mr Akio Morita, who at first thought the name nonsensical) and unwanted (according to the Hi - Fi dealers), the first Walkman was an adaptation of the Sony Pressman TCM 100 Tape Recorder, launched a year earlier. Despite this rather

qualified genesis, Sony had at a stroke created a genuine design, original that everyone wanted to buy, instantly and world-wide.

The first model of the Sony Walkman, the TPS - L2, instantly marketed as the Freestyle in Australia and Scandinavia, Sondabout in the United States and Stowaway in Britain, established the compact format that countless imitations have since varied only superficially.

The Walkman possessed, in the words of Akio Morita's memorable phrase ' potential to fill an as yet unrecognised market need'.

At a stroke it reconfigured existing technology into a compact, stylish package that was desirably portable, easy to operate and capable of delivering better quality sound than many domestic systems.

The Sony Walkman is a successful invention, it was designed to be worn leaving the listener free to walk about, as the name suggests.

SONY WALKMAN PERSONAL STEREO TIMELINE

From: <http://www.sel.sony.com/SEL/corpcomm/news/consumer/164.html>

1979

- Sony Walkman personal stereo is launched with the TPS-L2, forever changing the way consumers listen to music. Called the "Soundabout," the first Walkman stereo came with two headphone jacks so people could listen to music together. Originally, Sony was concerned that product would diminish the pleasure of people listening to music together, so two headphone jacks were created.

1982

- Sony releases first recordable Walkman stereo, as well as first Walkman stereo with personal tuner.

1983

- To complement the explosion of the American fitness craze, Sony introduces the innovative water-resistant Sports Walkman model, perfect for listeners with active lifestyles.

1984

- World's first one-piece line of compact disc players is unveiled, providing listeners with the ability to enjoy the crisp, clear sound of digital audio in the car.

1985

- Walkman stereo popularity hits the fashion elite as world-famous hair designer Jean Louis D'eforges creates the "Walkman Cut."

1987

- Just eight years after revolutionizing the way we listen to music, the first Walkman personal stereo becomes immortalized as an icon of American culture as a permanent installation at the Smithsonian Institution.

1990

- Addressing a need for high-quality digital personal audio, Sony introduces the World's first Digital Audio Tape (DAT) Walkman model.

1992

- Sony launches the MiniDisc (MD) recorder/player –the new generation Walkman stereo – with an ultra compact, digital, re-recordable optical disk with superior sound quality.
- Sony celebrates 50 million Walkman personal stereos sold in the United States.

1996

- World's lightest Discman® portable CD player is introduced with the debut of the D-777. The ultra light unit weighed less than 6.3 ounces.

1999

- The world's smallest MD recorder/player (3 1/8 x 3/4 x 3 3/8 inches) – the Sony MZ-R55 – is unveiled.

Less than an inch thick and small enough to fit in a shirt pocket, the newest addition to the MD line offers the ultimate in portability and convenience.

- MD becomes a fashion accessory. Diane Von Furstenburg designs a vest for the "Wired Woman," complete with a pocket for her own MiniDisc portable player/recorder.
- Sony Walkman personal stereo (cassette, CD and MD) sales hit 100 million in the United States.
- PC music lovers will now be able to download their favorite songs onto the ultimate Walkman model, the 2.5-ounce Memory Stick Walkman personal stereo. This new personal stereo records on Sony's

Memory Stick, a new type of exceptionally compact storage and transfer media.

- A new PC to MD interface is introduced, allowing MD owners to download and archive music from the Internet using their PC.
- The world's smallest MD player, the Sony MZ-E90, is barely larger than the MD itself, and is ideal for listening to favorite music on the go.
- New 4x and 2x CD to MD dubbing units allow music lovers to make their favorite music mixes in one-quarter or one-half the time, respectively.

Although the recording speed is 4x and 2x faster than normal play, there digital quality of the music is preserved.

DESIGN POLICY

Sony is an organisation which is both represented and represents itself as the paradigm of a 'design - led' corporation. Design at Sony is organised in a way which enables the company to make products which both create and respond to consumer 'needs' in a highly flexible manner. There are three elements of the organisation of design at Sony which have been the key to its success articulating production and consumption.

First, the hierarchy of occupations, in which design functions are more important than production activities; the functional and occupational status of design and designers at Sony is held to be greater. Secondly, designers at Sony have enjoyed relatively easy access to senior management and, indeed, have become the most of senior managers. Thirdly, design at Sony has been organised in such a way that designers are kept closely in touch with contemporary cultural trends and with the cultural practices of target consuming groupings. The designer is a radar - scanning art, architecture, technology, fashion, pop, ..., etc, and translating it into design and taking care of the visual 'look' and tactile 'feel' of a product which are crucial means of communicating with consumers.

The important place that design has in Sony, unlikely many traditional companies in which engineers are the 'sacred cows', generates an atmosphere of creativity and innovation, the design centre is the initiator of the entire product concept rather than developing the ideas and specifications of engineers and other professionals in the company. There is a group of 'crazy designers' with new and revolutionary ideas which recreate and

conceive magic solutions for the needs identified or created by the company and Sony argues that if the aim is to produce a new and revolutionary new concept these group of designers should manage the project, but if the aim is only to enhance production specifications and cost reduction the engineers has to be called.

Design at Sony is also organised to stay close to the final user; reading the 'signs' on the street as well as concentrating on the function and form of the products to respond to the needs with new or better existing products.

As a Japanese company, in which the team work and interaction between different professionals is a kind of industrial religion, Sony has created an interdisciplinary environment in which the new ideas and ways of doing things are shared and developed with all the teams looking forward aiming at the same target. This is the key of success in the actual competitive market place, and, on the other hand a great advantage that Sony has had when the 'race' of the consumer electronics products took place, and which, by the way, was the start point of globalization.

Through out the 1980's Sony presented the company as a global corporation aiming to operate in 'all' markets across the world, to reach as many potential consumers as possible and reorganising and re - engineering processes of production, in such a way, so that they will not be limited by the constraints of the nation - state. Sony adopted a strategy of globalization that involved moving their manufacturing and marketing operations to different locations around the world and setting up 'local' operations in various countries reducing production, shipping and handing costs. But this is not as simple as that !... A fully Japanese company trying to 'catch' a complete different world ... well, Sony began to interact and to employ professionals in the countries in which the company was planning to set operations and give full training.

So, having analysed the importance of multidisciplinary work and some rough origins of globalization, the question of how Japanese the Walkman is then arises. Traditional Japanese design is characterised by its compactness, aesthetic simplicity, attention to detail and miniaturisation. According to the former head of the Sony design centre, Mr Yasuo Kuroki, for example, the early Walkman model clearly drew upon Japanese tradition in that it used simple colours (specially black), its small size, the simplicity of its visual 'look', and, had linear form reflecting traditional tatami mats with their characteristic straight lines.

As far as Japanese design is concerned, the post - war period of reconstruction was strongly influenced by the United States. Many companies, like Sony, that grew up during this period, and that are now recognised as Japan's design leaders, did not embody Japanese 'tradition' in designing their products, they adapted mainly North American and German conceptions of what industrial design is and should be. Japanese design is not a tradition that has stayed throughout time, but rather it is a transculturated phenomenon, a process of hybridisation.

Rather than being the product of a closed homogeneous, national tradition, then, the Walkman is perhaps better viewed as a global material cultural artefact. Japanese designers have drawn and continue to draw upon a variety of cultural influences from around the world in creating 'Japanese' products for an increasingly global market place. Since the 1970's the number of Japanese 'travellers' has increased and they are defined as the man behind the camera... but it is not that stupid, they are kept in touch with the world and with open eyes to finally, like Sony, do what others have not done.

DESIGN DECISIONS

The Walkman was directed at young consumers. It was aimed at those people who already listened to music whilst moving around the home, driving in a car or motorbike or, simply, walking on the street. Observing that young people seemed to need to have music constantly with them, some listening everyday in their homes and others, carrying their 'personal' stereos on their shoulders, Morita and his colleagues felt that the Walkman would enable people to take their music with them.



Sony began to customise the product, targeting different sorts of Walkman at different consumer markets combining responsive design and visual communication with techniques of market segmentation to create the need to have the proper Walkman that goes with the lifestyle of the user. Sony was attempting at the same time to standardise the package and advertisements

and to individualise by responding to the different ways in which products were being used around the world by designing a range of models of the Walkman for different markets and lifestyles.

The Walkman is eminently portable, convenient, lightweight, pocket - sized, designed to be worn, like one's clothes, as part of one's self image or self styling. It is designed for movement, for people who are always out and about, for travelling light. It is part of the equipment of modern 'nomad', the self -sufficient urban voyager, ready for all weathers and circumstances. It is a testimony of the high value which the culture of late modernity places on mobility.

The Walkman is not only an essential part of young person's survival kit. Because of the 'lifestyling' process and the different sort of models and designs available it has become a daily stylish gadget that suit the taste of its owner. The variety of colours, shapes and sizes of the Walkman are crucial means of communicating with consumers. As production and consumption articulate the product receive its finishing touches, addressing a huge variety of users of all ages, taste and style with a proper Portable Cassette Player for each of them.

THE DESIGN

According to the development of the design policy, the context of the design decisions, previously treated, and the general characteristics of the Walkman, eminently portable, convenient, lightweight, pocked sized, it is not a surprise to say that Sony had produced hundreds of different models, and will continue doing it.

Generally, the design of the Sony Walkman has been influenced by different sort of things that have happened since it was

launched in 1979. These sort of things are both a feedback from the users and a series of technological innovations.

Some of the key changes due to Users Feedback are:

- Elimination of the hot button (suppressing tape signal and amplification of ambient sound).
- Elimination of the extra headphones socket.
- Water proof models (Sports and Shower).
- Kid's version for the series of 'My first Sony'.
- Shock resistance (reduction of the cassette window)
- Different colours.
- Direction mode button (to play the other side of the tape without stopping and opening the machine).
- Improved ergonomics and tactile feel.
- Rounded edges to carry the Walkman in the pocket more comfortable or even in the hand.
- Alarm clock (in the latest models)
- comfortable headphones.
- And some of the significant technological changes that in some way influenced a change in the design, both shape and functions) are:
- Microelectronics (reduction in size).
- Automatic Tape Selector (elimination of the selection buttons for normal, Cr202 or metal tapes)
- Liquid Crystal Displays ('Techy' look !...)
- Digital electronics (the knurled wheel to perform the tuning option of the radio

was replaced by two buttons '+' and '-' and it made it possible to preset radio stations in the memory, (more buttons).

- DCS. Digital Cassette System (Elimination of the front ' window ', the need to watch how the tape was going an how much of it was played was replaced with information on the LCD. So the cassette is now completely covered and the traditional view of the two running wheels of the cassette were replaced semantically by two functional buttons that look like the wheels and the product shouts 'I have a cassette inside').
- Megga Bass (enhanced bass and variable frequency amplifier).

The cassette is now suffering something similar like the vinyl long play experienced in the past when it was replaced by its 'son' the Compact Disc. The cassette is now slowly being replaced by the Minidisk and new Walkmans are getting smaller, full of high tech functions and innovations and a very modern look.

What is Next ?

The future seems to be brigh for the music on the move. Every issue of the latest technology magazines is full of new MP3 players with stunning design. See T3 Magazine issue 42 January 2000 pages 18, 38 and 135.

MARKETING



In a company such as Sony, whose charter is to 'do what others have not done', the Former chairman and cofounder, Mr Akio Morita, believes that customers cannot say they want a product which they have never imagined before. Morita faced exactly this problem in the now - legendary development of the Sony Walkman.

During the end of the 1970's when the Walkman was first prototyped, tape recorders were products which played and recorded sound. Presented with a machine which not only lacked on recording facility but which also could be used by only one person, through headphones, Sony's marketing department concluded that this was a 'dumb product !' Fortunately Morita had tried the Walkman himself and love it. The marketing scepticism was over - ruled and a great success story resulted.

But were does this leave market (needs) research ? Sony knew a lot about customer needs for tape recorders and concluded from this research that the Walkman was not viable. But what assumptions was their research based on ? The need to record is explicit in the name tape recorder. To ask customers whether a tape recorder needs to record is self - contradictory. Ideally, market research should ask questions at a variety of levels from general to specific. Finding out how, when were customers want to listen to music calls for very different research to finding out whether a tape recorder needs to record.

Sony did actually have marketing data which could have been interpreted as evidence of a market need. 'music on the move' was a recognised trend at the time and the need for portability in tape recorders was only being addressed by putting carrying handles and huge battery compartments on otherwise unwieldy products. Furthermore it seems likely that if the marketing department had explored customer's use of recording facilities, they might have found it less essential than they thought. Customers rarely record anything outside the home and, at home, most would have a second Hi - Fi system, probably Sony as well ! So it is no sense in a company like Sony to kill the mother after the children was born, they also create a second need, record with great quality at home and then listen in the little new thing while on the move.

Akio Morita says in his memories, talking about the Walkman that '... The public does not know what is possible, but we do. So instead of doing a lot of market research, we refine our thinking on a product and its use and try to create a market for it by educating and communicating with the public... The more freedom you have to design your new product in radically

different ways from existing products, the more you have to ask basic questions to discover the underlying needs of customers... The more constrained you are to designing a product which functions in similar ways to existing products the more specific your questions... You simply need to know what they think about what is already on offer'

Akio Morita's doubts were not, therefore, be whether or not to conduct market research but rather what type of questions you should ask and how the company has to work to successfully launch a completely new product in the market.

When the personal stereo was introduced as the Walkman in Japan during July 1979, the company developed a launch strategy that did not involve a large advertisement budget. Instead, the company made maximum use of publicity channels. Unlike advertisement which is paid for and clearly controlled by the company, publicity is not 'bought' in quite the same way. Public relations work is often hardly to identify, yet it can be very effective, particularly when it appears as 'news' or magazine articles (as opposed to advertisements that seem to come directly from the company). In the initial selling of the Walkman, public relations and publicity was far more significant than advertising.

The company decided to make available hundreds of sets of the new portable cassette player, free of charge, to key persons prior the public launch. These key persons were carefully chosen and selected. Sets were given to magazine editors, and specially, touring musicians, they use to carry records and tapes of the music they are going to play and the directors comments and instructions of different aspects of the piece in order to be prepared for the concert.

Musicians from the famous European and American orchestras were often approached by the media and so, on the photographs and in the comments the New gadget and its benefits will be described in some way with some level of detail.

Listening was also emphasised when the press were invited to the launch of the Walkman. The invitations were sent out on Audio cassettes, rather than the usual invitation card or press release. They were invited to watch youngsters roller - skating while listening to their Walkmans and to listen to the Walkmans in specially designed rooms for the purpose.

A further promotional tactic involved the company paying couples to stroll through Tokyo's biggest and important shopping district whilst listening to their Walkmans. Several *Vox Populi interviews*

were conducted in collaboration with broadcasters, in the airports and train stations, to ask visitors to Japan about their opinion and their responses to the new portable cassette player. Their reactions were video - taped and featured in news broadcasts.

After the mass media were approached and, in some way, the machine was now identified and recognised by the members of the public, via the tactics previously discussed, Sony increased its work on producing advertisements in which the language attempts to create or construct identification with the image. Advertising is the cultural language which speaks on behalf of the product. Advertising makes commodities speak. It must address the buyer. It must create an identification between the customer and the product. It must get us to see ourselves as the sort of person who buys and uses this kind of thing. It does so by addressing the consumers with meanings and representations that are working, in part, in the imagination. The metaphor of walking is broadened out to cover certain 'lifestyles' and 'social identities' which represent and embody the cultural idea of mobility, mobile privatisation, portability and movement. There are some Walkman advertisements which thematize 'walking', showing only women's legs and shoes.

The Sony Corporation has developed a very powerful graphic image and most of its advertisements are in printed posters, carefully edited catalogues, smart designed shops or sections of shops, and sponsoring expeditions and sport teams which, by the way, are widely transmitted to all corners of the world.

MEANINGS

Meanings help us to interpret the world, to classify it in meaningful ways, to 'make sense' of things and events, including those which we had never seen or experienced in real life but which occur in films and novels, dreams and fantasies, as well as objects in the real world. You can play the actual Walkman but you cannot think with it, or speak or write with it. Meanings bridge the gap between the material world and the 'world' in which language, thinking and communication take place - the 'symbolic' world

The word 'Walkman' is a new term, a noun to be precise, introduced to almost all the spoken languages in the world. In the electronic equipment shops, like Dixons in the U.K for example, this statement can be demonstrated just by simply asking to the clerk if he can show you the "walkmans", immediately he or she will show you a huge quantity of different types, makes, labels and varieties of Personal Stereo Radio - Cassette Players, not only the Sony makes. Other ways to demonstrate this affirmation is by asking someone who



actually has a Personal Stereo that which make is your "walkman"?, he or she will look on their machine and answer with a clear and well pronounced 'Aiwa', 'Sharp', 'Philips' or ... 'Sony'.

The Oxford English Dictionary, Volume XIX, has an entry for the word "Walkman" as follows:

Walkman. A proprietary name for small battery - operated cassette player and headphones capable of being worn by a person who is on foot.

Here The Oxford English Dictionary tries to use language in a plainly descriptive way to represent what the Walkman meant. However, Oxford's description only works if you already know what such words as 'battery - operated', 'cassette player' and 'headphones' mean. on the other hand, there is a mistake in the definition, it should say 'battery - powered' and no 'battery - operated'. The Oxford's definition really says that ' this object works like a small headphone cassette - player, powered by batteries and that you can walk while operating it'. It is using words metaphorically.

Continuing with the Oxford's definition:

1981 *Trade Marks Jnl.* 25 mar. 623/2 *Walkman...* Electrical and electronic apparatus and instruments ... for transmitting, receiving, tuning, recording and reproducing audio and visual signals ... batteries; aerials; loudspeakers; headphones; earphones ... cassettes ... Sony ... **1883** *Official Gaz.* (U.S Patent office) 20 Dec. TM 288/1 Sony Corporation ... *Walkman* ... For audio tape player, audio tape recorders, radios and headphones.

The Sony Walkman is not only a part of our culture. It has a distinct 'culture' of its own. Around the Walkman there has developed a distinctive set of meanings and practices. The very word 'WALK - MAN' conjures up an image, or an idea - a concept - of the device.

So, the Walkman is 'cultural' because we have constituted it as a meaningful object. We can talk, think about and imagine it. It is also 'cultural' because it connects with a distinct set of social practices (like listening to music while travelling on the train, metropolitan or the underground, for example) which are specific to our culture or way of life. It is cultural because it is associated with certain kinds of people (young people, for example, music - lovers, ..., etc); with certain places (the city, the open air, walking around a museum) - because it has given or acquired a social profile or identity. The image of the Sony Walkman (sleek, high - tech, functional in design, miniaturised) has become a sort of metaphor which stands for or represents a distinctively late - modern, technological culture or way of life.

The meanings attached to, or coded into, objects in the act of their initial production are never automatically folded into the psychic life of those at whom they are aimed. Meaning is also produced by consumers through the use to which they put those objects in the practice of their everyday lives. Meanings are not just sent by producers and received passively by consumers; rather, meanings are actively made in consumption.

The Walkman took those elements associated with private listening and allowed them to leave their normal position within social space and to enter a domain where they were materially and symbolically 'out of place'. Its 'private - listening - in - public - places' aspect triggers off many themes associated with late - modernity as a distinctive way of life: the lonely figure in the crowd, using the media to screen out the routines of boring, every day life; the emphasis on mobility and choice; the self - sufficient individual wandering alone through the city landscape.

The form of listening that is a decisive break from the past is that made possible by the Walkman. If music is a kind of storage place for the emotions generated by cultural conflicts and struggles, then we can talk about the production of such conflicts and struggles on the human body at the press of a button. In the age of the Walkman (or its more sophisticated affiliates, the Discman and the minidisk), the emotions have become portable.

The Walkman allows its users to be missing and to be enclosed in a self - imposed sound landscape, a barricade a barrier, a blockage between 'me' and the world, that irritates onlookers which find themselves reduced to the activity of looking, alone hearing the 'buzz' from the Walkman user headphones.

In its mobile, wraparound world, the Walkman, like dark glasses and iconoclastic fashion, serves to set one apart while simultaneously reaffirming individual contact to certain common, if shifting, measures (music, fashion, aesthetics, metropolitan life, ..., etc and their particular cycles of mortality). So the Walkman is both a mask and a masque: a quiet putting into act of localised theatrics. It reveals itself as a significant symbolic gadget for the nomads of modernity, in which music on the move is continually being decontextualized and recontextualized in the inclusive acoustic and symbolic life of every day life.

The Walkman is a successful invention, designed to be worn leaving the listener free to walk about.

The designer is a radar -scanning art, architecture, technology, fashion, pop,...., etc. And translating it into design.

The Walkman was directed at young consumers observing that they seem to need to have music constantly with them.

Sony reconfigured existing technology into a compact stylish package, desirably portable, easy to operate and capable of delivering better quality sound than many domestic systems.

Design articulate the world of engineers with the market and consumers.

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Keep your personal stereo . . . PERSONAL.

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