

Luxuries of Today, Necessities of Tomorrow?

By Jon Kenton

What is luxury? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary luxury is an “indulgence in something that provides pleasure, satisfaction, or ease” but it’s not “absolutely necessary.” If we take a moment and look around our homes, offices or cars, I am sure we will find many items that we see as true necessities. I would bet that at one time these items were seen as luxuries, even frivolous perhaps. The Austrian economist and philosopher Ludwig von Mises once said “The luxury of today is the necessity of tomorrow.” Where technology is involved, history has proven this time and again.

Consider certain fundamentals that the majority of the population now own and couldn’t or at least wouldn’t do without – radio, television and even the refrigerator and freezer. At one time these were seen as luxury items and are now commonplace. In the 1980s a new gadget appeared on the market. It was expensive and bulky and most thought it would only ever be used by business executives. Any guesses – yup that was the cell phone. There are now nearly 3.5 billion mobile phone subscriptions, that’s over half the population of the world!! Does that make it a luxury or necessity?

Given our earlier definition of luxury, i.e. indulgent and unnecessary, most of the latest techno-gadgets would seem to fit the bill. They are either expensively adorned or “designerized” versions of current products that would seem to most to be highly indulgent or clever new technology or packaging that’s looking for that magic demographic who deem it necessary. Lets take a look at a few current examples, some are creeping into the mainstream others are still “way out there” you can decide, where they fit.

Staying with the mobile phone theme, if you want the designer label to go with your latest device they certainly come with a luxury price tag. Tag Heuer to be exact. They have a phone called the Meridiist which they say is “The perfect cosmopolitan travelling companion, uniting formal purity with functional perfection.” No extra special features but you can get it in crocodile skin! A snip at around \$6000! If Christian Dior is more your style then they will soon have their latest creation available for \$5000, at least this phone is studded with diamonds! If these are a little pricy even for you but you still want the luxury label, Armani and Prada phones can be had for around a tenth of these two “necessities.” If adding glitter or gold fits your definition of luxury then you can pickup almost any techno-device with “enhancements.” From a jewel encrusted \$20,000 Kodak camera to a gold plated Gameboy (\$25K) or even a whopping 71” plasma TV with a 24 karat gold casing for an equally whopping \$132,000.

Back to the more mundane, at least pricewise. How about those GPS units? Once a definite luxury but not so now with portable units available for a few

hundred dollars, but are they really necessary? They certainly can be convenient when visiting unknown places or trying to find the nearest gas station or Tag store to buy your \$5,000 cellphone. The technology continues to evolve and before long they will be a near standard feature in most cellphones or cars.

Multimedia is now everywhere from our desktop to our mobile devices. The integration of these devices and our homes and lives is less pervasive. The DLNA (Digital Living Network Alliance, www.dlna.org) has brought together over 250 companies from the fields of consumer electronics, computing and mobile device with the goal of changing this. They are creating standards and specifications aimed at the next generation of devices that will ensure seamless integration such that we can watch or listen to whatever we want, where we want when we want.

This may seem like an indulgent luxury today but thinking back to the days when the VCR was first introduced we are at about the same point. Once we can truly gain such control over our ever increasing multimedia environments, necessities they will be.