

Apple a no-show but iPad looms

AFP, Las Vegas

The annual Consumer Electronics Show kicks off here on Thursday but the hottest device around, and the trailblazing company that makes it, won't be on the sprawling show floor.

Apple, whose iPad touchscreen tablet computer was the hit new gadget of last year, is once again shunning the electronics extravaganza that attracts tens of thousands of buyers and sellers from around the world to the Las Vegas strip.

Apple may be a no-show but the Cupertino, California-based company behind the iPod, iPhone and iPad and its iconic co-founder Steve Jobs will loom large over the four-day event at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

"Right now, in the consumer electronics space, Apple is the shining star that everyone and their brother are chasing," said Silicon Valley technology analyst Rob Enderle.

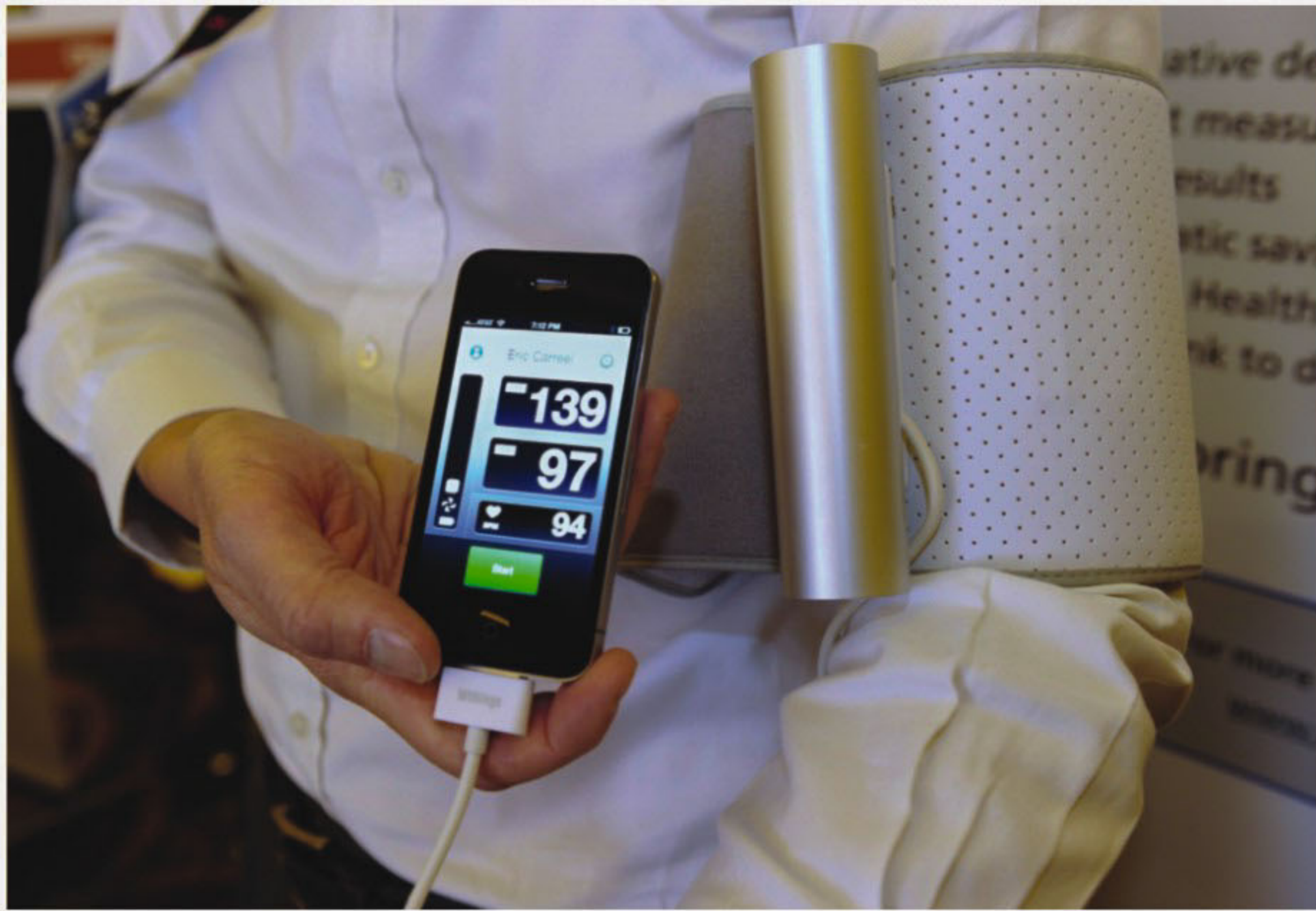
And what rival firms have in their sights is the iPad, which sold more than eight million units between April, when it landed in US stores, and the end of September, Apple's last reporting period.

Goldman Sachs predicts iPad sales could top 37.2 million units in 2011 and technology research firm Gartner forecasts total tablet computer sales of 55 million units this year.

"There's a tremendous buzz about tablets," said Tara Dunion of CES organizer the Consumer Electronics Association.

"I've seen at least 40 new tablets announced and we're estimating there could be up to 80 new tablets launched at CES," Dunion said.

"I don't think you'll be able to walk 10 feet on the show floor without seeing some kind of a tablet



The Smart Blood Pressure Monitor from Withings, a traditional arm strap style blood pressure monitor which connects to an iPhone or iPad for instant readouts is on display.

device," said analyst Stephen Baker of the NPD Group.

South Korea's Samsung and US computer giants Hewlett-Packard and Dell are among the technology titans which have already come out with tablet devices.

Samsung launched its Galaxy Tab, which is powered by Google's Android software, in November and has reported sales of over one million units.

Smaller than the iPad, the Galaxy Tab features a seven-inch (18-centimeter) touchscreen compared with the iPad's 9.7-inch (24.6-cm) display.

The Galaxy Tab has front- and rear-facing cameras for video chat --

a feature absent from the first generation of the iPad -- and can also play Adobe's Flash video software, which is banned from the Apple device.

HP unveiled its HP Slate 500, which runs Microsoft's Windows 7 computer operating system and is aimed more at professionals than consumers, in October and Dell began selling its tablet computer, the Streak, in June.

Canada's Research In Motion, maker of the BlackBerry, is also planning its own touchscreen tablet computer this year, the PlayBook, aiming it at business users like HP.

At last year's CES, Microsoft chief executive Steve Ballmer showed off Windows-powered tablet proto-

types but the US software giant has been slow to get the products to market.

Ballmer is scheduled to give a keynote speech Wednesday on the eve of the CES opening and NPD Group's Baker said he expects the Microsoft chief to unveil his latest plans for Windows-based tablets.

Toshiba and Motorola are among the other household names which are expected to unveil tablet computers at CES and there will be scores of others -- most of which are unlikely to keep Apple's Jobs up at night.

"We are going to be up to our armpits in crappy tablets, and I do mean crappy," said Enderle.

The beggars' prerogative

MAHMUDUR RAHMAN

Probably a couple of years ago, there was a survey of the begging population in Dhaka at mosque points on a Friday. While this selection may or not meet general acquiescence, it was nevertheless a scientific exercise and came up with some startling revelations.

The bulk of those surveyed suggested that they would be inclined to start up some form of a small business if they could get the capital. One group however were of the view that their daily earnings from their profession (if indeed it can be called as such) were enough for them to get by.

Some years on, here are some excerpts from an interesting discourse between a small family emerging from a fast food joint in Gulshan and those seeking alms:

Father to son: Give this five-taka note to the little boy so that he can buy some food. Let us thank Allah that we can do so as they are unfortunate.

Father to a woman with a child: I'll give you five takas, but why must you beg? Can't you work for a living such as domestic help?

The woman: What can I do sir? Who would employ me? Besides, with the money offered for domestic help these days, I can barely cover house rent.

The mother: What will happen to this nation?

That last question hangs rather heavily in the air. The unfortunates have moved from the main roads to the side-roads and alleys, and in many cases, their appeals are provocative whenever their 'appeals' are not heard. It seems to echo the view of our finance minister when he said that micro-credit has not

achieved its basic goal of alleviating poverty in spite of the stupendous funds that has been pumped in to rural and urban economies.

In the same breath, it would be wrong to lambast the micro-credit system itself. Like most man evolved systems and processes, there are the inevitable flaws that with the appropriate intervention would probably deliver some real results. The issue is of funds being proportionate with the growth of population and the relevant follow-up and monitoring that does appear to be limited to button-punching desk-top efforts.

From a distance it would appear that the corporate world can do more a lot more, provided they find the appropriate partners that can deliver on their bit. With government patronage, it might just about produce some visible progress. Unfortunately, the inevitable issue with these partners is that they too must be allowed to progress with some incentives in mind for their workforce.

There is also a lot to be done with the beneficiaries. The wheat must be separated from the chaff so as to differentiate between the really 'unfortunates' and the 'opportunistic unfortunates' simply because of mindset issues. After all, the days of true philanthropy are something for the history books. In modern-day parley, making corporate social responsibility work is preferable, along with having patience and belief in the system.

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Chinese copies shrink India's silk sari industry

AFP, New Delhi

For centuries, the stunning silk saris woven by hand in the holy city of Varanasi have been prized by Indian women, but an influx of cheap Chinese-made copies is destroying the local industry.

Badruddin Ansari, one of the few weavers still in business, says that most of his former colleagues now struggle to eke out a living as vegetable sellers, tea stall operators or rickshaw drivers.

"When a person loses his home and his livelihood, where can he go?" he asked angrily.

"I hope the art of making Banarasi saris will survive. The government must ban these imported saris or put a heavier duty on them to save the domestic industry."

Banarasi silk saris -- named after Banaras, the former name of Varanasi -- are famed for their embroidery and still sought after by northern Indian brides for their big day, even though the dresses are now normally made in China.

Rajni Kant, director of the Human Welfare Association, a non-profit group working with weavers in Varanasi since 1993, has seen the damaging effect of Chinese imports.

"To give just one example, a 55-year-old man I know started weaving at the age of 15," he said. "He quit the handloom three years ago and now works as a manual labourer. There are hundreds of thousands of people like him."

More than 60 per cent of the handloom industry has collapsed in Varanasi since 2003, according to Kant.

In 2007 reports emerged of weavers in Varanasi selling their blood to make ends meet as Chinese imitation saris flooded the market, costing about 2,500 rupees (55 dollars) compared with at least 4,000 rupees for an original.

Official import figures for saris from China are low, but textile experts say much of the material is imported as fabric, not as tailored saris, and a lot makes its way into India as contraband via Nepal.

"It's doubtful whether these imitation saris even enter India as saris. They are probably imported as fabric, bales of silk which traders then cut and sell as saris," said Ritu Sethi, head of the non-profit Crafts Revival Trust.

Weavers say that Chinese factories produce huge amounts of silk fabric at a government-subsidised prices and send the finished cloth to India.



Shoppers browse through Banarasi saris for sale at a shop in New Delhi.

Registered Indian imports of silk fabrics from China increased by 23 percent between 2008-09 and 2009-10, amounting to nearly 6.4 billion rupees despite India imposing an anti-dumping duty on silk fabric.

A. K. Shukla, deputy director for the Varanasi office of India's Development Commissioner for Handlooms, told AFP that the 14 percent duty on silk fabric was too low.

"We have to re-examine the issue," he

acknowledged.

The Indian government granted a patent to protect silk saris woven in Varanasi in 2009, but the certification has made little difference on the ground, weavers and lobby groups told AFP.

"We have a well-meaning government but the GI (geographical indication) act should get more teeth. Not one person has been hauled to jail yet for making or selling imitation Banarasi saris as the real thing," Sethi said.

Many sari makers accept that customers know nothing of the made-in-Varanasi certificate scheme and often cannot tell the difference between an import and a genuine product.

Ansari, who runs a sari-weaving business with 400 weavers, said he could not predict how long he would be able to continue but that he was determined to keep going as long as possible.

"We can't become dependent on China for everything," he said.

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