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The Uphill Climb of Single-Purpose Devices

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By [Heidi Adkisson](#)

Having started my tech career in the cellular industry back in the era of brick phones, I've had a particular interest in the evolution of mobile devices. And I remember when the first Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) hit the market the burning question was whether PDAs should be stand-alone devices or subsumed into cell phones. Eight years since the iPhone launch the answer seems obvious but at the time there were some compelling reasons people wanted a PDA that was separate from a phone. The PDAs at the time were "purpose built" where smartphones had functional compromises. If you lost your smartphone you lost both your cell phone and your PDA. Two separate devices (cell phone and PDA) were also less expensive than the early smartphones.

We all know how the story ended. Smartphones have not only replaced stand-alone PDAs, but also to a large extent stand-alone cameras and MP3 players. Tablets for many people have supplanted PCs and have become all-purpose media devices used for consuming movies, TV shows, books, and periodicals. The advance of technology and connectivity allows for a single mobile device to do many things well. And it's hard to beat the convenience of a single device.



Pono Players

And yet...there are single-purpose portable devices trying to make a go of it. CES this year included the shipping of Neil Young's [\\$400 Pono Player](#) and Sony unveiling [a \\$1200 Walkman](#). This fall, Amazon released the [Kindle Voyage](#) — at \$200 a premium dedicated e-reader. And there are a number of high-end compact digital cameras, including [a \\$900 Panasonic Lumix](#). These are not mass-market products —they are instead aiming at a market of connoisseurs willing to pay for a superior experience.

But even connoisseurs have their limits. The challenge for all the devices is to deliver perceived value that is commensurate with the dollar costs and increased inconvenience of carrying an additional device — a first-world problem for sure —but an issue nonetheless.

The debate around the Pono Player has been particularly interesting. The cache rests heavily on Neil Young and cohorts who reject the compressed audio experience most smartphones and MP3 players deliver. Here [the perceived value may be greater than the actual value](#), but as the saying goes “perception is reality.” Still, it's hard to believe this device won't have an uphill climb, particularly since it lacks much in the way of a music library out of the starting blocks.

While all camera sales have declined, the market for “mirror-less” compacts has particularly diminished. The challenge is the somewhat uncomfortable spot they occupy between increasingly good smartphone cameras and DSLRs, the choice of professionals and serious enthusiasts. For the average person taking snapshots, the smartphone camera suffices. For the professional/enthusiasts the compacts have performance compromises relative to DSLRs that can make it hard to justify the cost.

At least in the near-term dedicated e-readers have distinguishing features that could more easily justify their purchase for the serious reader. Unlike LCD screens, e-ink displays can be easily read in bright sunlight. The small, light form factor of e-readers makes it easier to hold over an extended time period compared to most tablets (and indeed, many paper books). Battery life is measured in weeks not hours. And while you can spend around \$200 for a premium e-reader (Kindle Voyage), an entry-level Kindle will set you back only \$79.

The landscape of mobile devices is still very much in flux, but the die has pretty well been cast in terms of a single device that can do many things well. Maybe not as well as a dedicated device, but well enough so that the convenience outweighs any other diminishing aspects of the experience. For a stand-alone device to make it today it needs to deliver strong differentiating value — something that is increasingly difficult to do.

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