

How Google is wooing the fashion industry

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Google Could Beat Apple At Fashion—Just Like It Did Phones

While the **Apple** Watch has made its way [to Vogue](#) and [Beyonce's Instagram](#), it's **Google's** Android Wear that's quickly catching on with **designers** at large.

This week at the elite watch conference Baselworld, **Google** signed on **Michael Kors** and **Nixon** to further diversify the lineup. That means in the 20 months since Android Wear originally debuted, **Google** has enlisted nine tech companies and four fashion labels to produce 18 unique Android Wear watches of their own—and that's not counting a multitude of sizing, color, and band options.

Meanwhile, **Apple** still has one watch, made by **Apple**. If you'd like, you can buy a band from other **designers** like Hermes. But the hardware? The aesthetic? The watch itself? That comes from **Apple**.

History Repeats Itself

It's a familiar story. **Google** has always offered what the industry calls an open platform—anyone can take Android and stick it on any piece of hardware they want. Meanwhile, **Apple** offers a closed platform—where no one can build more than a case or an app for an **Apple** hardware/software product.

Each strategy has benefitted each company in its own way. With a closed system, **Apple** gets to uphold high standards and charge a premium for the experience. Its users are loyal. Its products last a long time. [One billion](#) of its iOS devices have been sold around the planet to date. Meanwhile, with an open system, **Google** gets breadth. Android devices are produced by dozens of manufacturers, each breaking their backs to produce, market, and compete to sell **Google** devices. So prices drop. Install base expands. And Android becomes the biggest mobile platform in the world, with 1.4 billion users that actually [make Apple look relatively small](#), depending how you slice the data. That's not counting its other crown jewels across mobile at large, like Search, Maps, or AdSense.



"One of the other things we realized when we started Android Wear was, when you think about things people wear, they have really diverse styles. It isn't the case that one style fits all, in any clothing or accessory or other kind of apparel," **David Singleton**, VP of Android Wear, says. "A lot of our DNA working on Android has always been to create an ecosystem of partners to work together to create something bigger than the sum of its parts, and that's what we're trying to do here."

Imagine a world where humanity only dresses in four different outfits—black, white, gold, and rose gold.

That strategy worked for Android Wear's first fashion partnership, **Fossil**, which cites its **Fossil Q Founder** as its top-selling watch, period, of the 2015 holiday season. At \$295, it's more or less the Bentley of **Fossils**. But watches are just one small swatch of a much larger piece of fabric. **Google's** open platform is poised to leave a much larger impact on the [\\$1.2 trillion fashion industry](#) than it has on smartphones—because while everyone is happy to use the same phone as the person sitting next to them, fashion is a form of personal expression. Even those who ride the latest trends don't want to be matchy-matchy with everyone else on the street.

Or put another way, imagine a world where humanity only dresses in four different outfits—representing the black, white, gold, and rose gold finishes of an iPhone. That doesn't look like freedom. That looks like prison.



Why Should Fashion Cede Design To Apple?

Now that Android Wear is almost two years old, we're beginning to see the fruits of the open Android strategy in wooing the fashion world.

"Watches and jewelry are a part of my **design** DNA—I've been **designing** both for years, and our customers know and love our accessories. When we decided to get involved with wearable technology, it was understood that we would create our own," **Michael Kors** says. The success of his label's Runway watch, which debuted in 2006, has been [in jeopardy with competition from the Apple Watch](#), and yet, what impetus does **Michael Kors** have to give up their watch business to get into the **Apple** Watch band business? "We wanted our singular aesthetic for our wearables launch," he says. "It just made sense that we'd continue to **design** our watches—working with a great partner for the technology piece of it."

That sentiment was echoed by [Nixon](#), a company known for its high casual men's line of timepieces as well as older, performance-oriented smartwatches for surfing. **Nixon** just announced its first Android Wear watch, The Mission.

"It would be great if **Apple** weren't a closed system! Because we're **Apple** fans, too," Tyson White, VP of product at **Nixon**, says. "But we're just as happy with **Google** and the Android Wear platform."



In fact, the team at **Nixon** had spent the last three-and-a-half years talking to specialists across

the consumer electronics industry, trying to figure out the best approach to build beyond their original smart surfing watch and bring their dream product—The Mission—to market: a sport watch that could give real-time reports on water and snow and deep-track activity, for surfers and snowboarders, all while standing up to the rigors of these extreme sports.

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Just creating an **Apple** Watch app couldn't work for **Nixon**, because aside from the problem that it's not **Nixon**'s hardware or aesthetic, the **Apple** Watch (like every other smartwatch on the market) wasn't durable enough for their use case. "When we tested the **Apple** Watch and countless others, I'd always trip out when I'd go to the sink and watch my hands. I was worried I was going to fry it," White says. "Most are splashproof at best."

Nixon eventually decided it could handle building its own hardware and updating it over time, but only if it had a core operating system that could grow and develop alongside it. "We wanted to build equity in a platform where we could update the hardware and the form factor, but we built our own ecosystem aligned with an OS that's going to last a long time," he says. "There was no other option better than **Google**."

"If we just built a watch that had its own OS to do the stuff we wanted it to do, in a year's time, it's going to be outdated, in two years time, it's going to be obsolete," he continues. On the other hand, adopting Android OS now would allow **Nixon** to side with **Google** early to "continue down a potentially infinite path" in intelligent apparel.



Google Is Providing The Thread For Designers To Weave The Future

And that never-ending path is really what the potential of Android Wear is all about. Today, smartwatches on whole are a small business compared to, say, smartphones. But if you look at what **Google** is working on—technology like [touch sensitive fabrics](#) and [accessories that sense gestures](#)—it's obvious that technology will one day be woven into our clothing as simply as polyester blends.



White minces no words that the **Nixon** is "absolutely" predisposed to continue working with **Google** into the next five or more years, as these visions are realized for market. Meanwhile, **Michael Kors's brand** feels wearable technology will be a "big business" in the future, so it just "makes sense" for it to partner on the tech but control the **design**.

And what gets concerning about the viability of **Apple's** strategy—if we really are to consider it a fashion company now—is how its closed approach not only will limit overall adoption of the **Apple Watch**, but limit the extent to which **Apple** can keep afloat in the sheer depth of wearables to come.

In this regard, Android Wear is poised to become the only viable OS not just for the fashion industry's smartwatches, but for the entire fashion industry at large. And when the core components of smart garments become so cheap that there's little difference between a pair of Levi's and a pair of smart Levi's, **Apple** will need to decide whether to finally open iOS, or whether it can sell enough mock black turtlenecks that it won't matter.

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