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Tiny Echo heard

Fledgling local firm mixes with the big guys at Las Vegas show

By Kim Peterson
STAFF WRITER

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LAS VEGAS -- Muna Handal-Dayeh scanned the crowded convention floor -- where corporate giants swaggered about, where industry analysts coolly held court, where laid-off techies searched for jobs and where small startups like hers vied for attention -- and spoke what for many at the Consumer Electronics Show is a universal truth.

"The whole world converges here," she said. "That's the amazing thing. This is the place to come."

And they did come, 100,000 people in all, to check out the latest technology and the hottest gadgets in the ever-changing world of consumer electronics. More than 2,000 companies were there, hoping to see and be seen.

Major players like Intel and Microsoft made announcements about products. Panasonic hosted a huge pavilion with televisions and a band of violinists. Toshiba dispensed bottled water with its own label.

And in a 10-foot-by-10-foot booth in one of the many wings of the Las Vegas Convention Center, Handal-Dayeh and her co-workers set up shop.

Their company, Echo Mobile Music, is one of 23 San Diego County companies to exhibit at the show, and it's probably one of the smallest there. Echo has fewer than 20 employees, each working out of their homes or personal offices.

Formed in May 2000, the company has yet to close any big deals or make any money. But after spending more than \$1 million for product development, Echo has a device called the Music Keeper that is starting to get some notice.



The device looks like a portable compact disc player, but can record and store digital copies of discs placed inside of it. It has a 40-gigabyte hard drive, which can hold about 10,000 songs, and doesn't need a computer to work.

"We're hoping that in the future, our technology is as common as a VCR in your home," said Tony Handal, president of Echo and Handal-Dayeh's brother.

Echo exhibited at this show last year, but didn't have much more than a vision then and was relegated to the "emerging technologies" section of the convention center. This year is the company's coming-out party, Handal said.

Chris Altare, the man who designed and named the Music Keeper, said he wanted it to be easy for anybody to use, including those without computers.

"My mother, who's in her 80s, can operate this player," he said.

Women in their 80s were in short supply yesterday. There were, however, hordes of young, tech-savvy convention attendees, some of whom immediately identified what may prove to be a drawback for Echo. The player is not made to upload music onto a computer, nor can it "burn," or record, onto a blank CD.

"That would be a huge knock," Hahn Choi told Echo employees. "I can tell you I would slam you for that."

Choi is a technical analyst for Tech TV, a cable television channel that plans to give out "Best of CES" awards later this week. Handal assured him that it was possible to add that capability, if a manufacturer wanted to do so.

Choi and other Tech TV workers stayed at Echo's booth for several minutes, debating consumers' right to enjoy digital music at a time when the recording industry is preoccupied with copyright protection. The discussion turned friendly, and before leaving Choi said he would mention Echo to Tech TV judges.

Handal let out a sigh when Choi and his colleagues left.

"I'm exhausted already," he said. Adding the ability to upload and burn to the player might open up a legal can of worms, he said.

Echo's booth was rarely quiet yesterday. People from other companies walked over and suggested forging alliances. Companies that help startups, for a fee, stopped by with a friendly word. Reporters from as far away as the United Kingdom asked for more information.

"You know, if I ever wanted to quit smoking, now would be a good



time to try," said Nick Estep, an Echo employee who tried vainly for hours to get away for a cigarette break.

Buyers from retail stores also stopped by to check out the Music Keeper. These buyers, who represent companies from mom-and-pop shops to Circuit City and Best Buy, often attend this convention to scope out products for the next holiday shopping season.

"I like it," said one buyer, Dan Ludden, as he examined the buttons on the music player. "The biggest problem is usually finding stuff on these things."

It's still a little early for Echo to be talking to buyers, Handal-Dayeh said. The company may first need to persuade a big manufacturer, such as Philips or Sony, to produce the players for the mass market.

The show ends Friday, and Handal-Dayeh and her husband will pack the items from Echo's booth into their Dodge Durango and drive back to San Diego.

It cost Echo several thousand dollars to be part of the show, including \$4,500 to rent a booth. Some companies here spend a lot of money on these shows, but Handal-Dayeh said she doesn't even want to compete with them. The industry contacts Echo makes will be worth more to her than any amount that others spend, she said.

"All we need to get is a little bit of the right attention," she said.

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