

Call of the old

Retro is all the rage in handsets

Bobbie Johnson

First it was vintage heavy-metal T-shirts, then came leg warmers and Lycra. Now old mobile phones have become the retro fashion accessory to be seen with.

Twenty years after Britain's first mobile phone call was made, technology has leapt forward but hipsters and homebodies alike are rejecting flashy new models in favour of tried and trusted phone favourites.

Retrofone, a new company hoping to cash in on the trend, believes many people are fed up with complicated modern handsets and want to stick with the "classic" late 1990s designs they are used to.

"Retro has always been fashionable to some extent. People are always looking backwards," said Oly Tagg, who started the company after he found success selling old handsets on the auction website eBay.

"When you use an old phone, you're making a statement: I'm not with the main crowd, I'm slightly different."

Rather than suffering from mobile anxiety - embarrassment over the clunky look or large size of older handsets - a new generation of phone fanatics are using their antique handsets with pride.

"Most of these fashion things begin as an ironic flash in the pan and then end up being massive," says Kevin Braddock, contributing editor of men's style magazine GQ.



Sony Ericsson's 3G handset offers a compact compendium, but some fashionistas seek the bulkier vintage model on the left Photograph: Roger Bamber

"About five years ago phones stopped becoming a tool and became a way to express your personality. That means there is always going to be an appetite for phones that make you stand out."

Although older handsets have a high kitsch value, many people prefer them because they are simpler to use and less expensive than new models.

Environmentally-aware phone users are encouraged by the idea that it is greener to recycle mobiles than to discard them. With networks offering regular handset up-

grades to subscribers, one study has estimated that more than 105m phones are thrown away each year in Europe alone.

Not only could rescuing an old phone from the scrapheap crank up your cool factor, it could also save lives - a single mobile phone battery contains enough kidney-destroying cadmium to poison 600,000 litres of water.

"We actually contacted Oxfam about recycling," said Mr Tagg. "Now, every time we send a phone out, customers get a green bag so that they

can send back their old brick and recycle it."

The oldest mobile Retrofone sells in bulk dates back to 1996, although earlier models are available to collectors and dedicated buyers.

The most popular model is the Nokia 7110, hugely popular four years ago but now supplanted more advanced models. Its simplicity contrasts with the new third generation (3G) phones which are able to download music and film clips and make video calls.

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Model phones

Nokia 7110

Hugely popular when it came out four years ago, thanks to a large screen and spring-loaded key guard

Nokia 8110

The "banana phone" sold by the bucketload by combining the key guard with the receiver, which attracted customers put off by more miniature models

Motorola StarTac

Its clamshell design has evolved but the StarTac is loved by those who enjoy its clunky look

Ericsson T28

Five years old, but popular with users who like its design

Sony Z5

Half phone, half walkie-talkie, it remains a trend-setter