

Big Tech and Fashion Think They've Finally Figured Out Smart Glasses

Tech giants like Meta and Google are striking big deals and announcing new eyewear partnerships on smart glasses after a decade of failed attempts to make the devices fashionable.

By Marc Bain



Technofuturists have touted smart glasses as the next big device off and on for more than a decade. They were wrong, often embarrassingly so, because wearables makers were either laser-focused on the underlying technology at the expense of style — epitomised by the dorky Google Glass, which even a cameo in a Diane Von Furstenberg runway show couldn't make cool — or simply bolted half-baked features on existing products.

In the last few months, we've seen mounting evidence that tech and fashion are finally rowing in the same direction.

This week, Meta bought a minority stake in the eyewear maker EssilorLuxottica for \$3.5 billion, doubling down on the unexpected success of the two companies' smart glasses collaboration, which began with Ray-Ban and now includes Oakley. Meta is also reportedly planning an eyewear line with Prada, whose eyewear EssilorLuxottica holds a 10-year license to produce.

In May, Google — already back in the smart glasses game via a deal with Samsung — announced partnerships with Warby Parker, Gentle Monster and Kering Eyewear, which makes glasses for Kering brands including Gucci and Bottega Veneta, as well as other labels such as Cartier, Alaïa and Puma. The deal with Warby Parker included an investment of \$150 million by Google, while its tie up with Gentle Monster reportedly involved a \$100 million investment, though neither company has confirmed the news.

Apple, which knows a thing or two about making wearables fashionable with its Apple Watch, is gearing up to release its own smart glasses in 2026, according to Bloomberg, while Chinese tech giant Xiaomi recently unveiled its version of the technology.

These are major investments, and the market is brimming with optimism. Warby Parker's stock is up by more than one-quarter since the Google investment was announced.

But after so many prominent failures, why do tech giants, fashion executives and investors believe this time will be any different?

The clearest reason is the surprise success of the second generation of Ray-Ban Meta glasses, which debuted in late 2023 and as of February had sold more than 2 million pairs. The company plans to scale production to 10 million units annually by the end of next year.





Those results have created confidence that consumers will actually buy smart glasses if they're done right. The Ray-Ban Meta glasses offer a number of functionalities, from capturing photos and videos to live streaming on Instagram, while being able to maintain the classic look of Ray-Ban styles like the Wayfarer. Meta has also augmented the glasses with AI features, such as live translation of a few languages, the ability to identify landmarks or get directions and general informational searches.

Those capabilities point to another cause for the rash of activity: "It's a bit of a race to leverage the AI models," said TD Cowen analyst Oliver Chen.

The expectation appears to be that, as AI advances, AI-powered smart glasses will be able to add new abilities to make them more useful — and therefore more desirable to consumers who will get all sorts of features in a package that finally just looks like a regular pair of sunglasses.

The latest smart glasses boom could fizzle out just like last time, and the time before. After all, it's still a novelty to see someone wearing Meta Ray-Bans in public. But unlike the Google Glass, you don't feel secondhand embarrassment for the wearer.

