

Apple Watch pivots to fitness – and focuses on a different style of self-help

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Will this pivot affect the physical health of Apple zealots? Credit: Shinya Suzuki, CC BY-ND

When Apple [unveiled its original watch in 2014](#), the California company touted [three tent-pole features](#) of the new wearable: style, communication and fitness. [Rolling out](#) the second-generation Apple Watch this week, Apple has positioned fitness, and fitness alone, as the device's main selling point. High-end fashion, and friend-to-friend gestures like the [heartbeat share](#), were hardly mentioned. Exercise was the unrivaled star of the watch reveal.

[Tim Cook's keynote](#) introduced the new ["Series 2" device](#) with a [promotional video](#) dominated by sports: color bursts of swimming, tennis, basketball, cycling, stairs, skateboarding, jogging and on and on. The watch's featured hardware changes, in addition to the requisite processor upgrade, were a GPS chip and a new "swimproof" water rating.

The upgraded operating system, [watchOS 3](#), is all about fitness too: new Activity watch faces, workout sharing, additional health metrics, and a new "Breathe" app. Cook called the watch the "ultimate device for a healthy life." He said he expected the new version to be "especially popular with runners" – and proceeded to invite Nike's brand chief to introduce a full-fledged, standalone unit: the [Apple Watch Nike+](#). The Nike version, with its own specialized bands and watch faces, was hailed as the "perfect running partner."

The Series 2 announcement did include a brief mention of new Hermès bands, as well as enhanced emojis and a "Scribble" finger-drawn input system. But the original tripartite pitch – style, communication and health – was reduced to a single, focused sell: the Apple Watch is a fitness device. And with that shift Apple has substituted a strand of self-improvement – disciplined and quantitative – for its longstanding appeals to iconoclastic self-expression.

Forget fashion, follow the market to fitness

Recall that the original watch was promoted with [videos narrated by designer Jony Ive](#), with purring, pornographic attention to design and exotic materials. Crucial to the original roll-out campaign was a relentless effort to link the watch to the fashion world: the [Self](#), [Flare](#) and [Vogue China](#) covers, the [12-page ad spread](#) (and [glowing Ive profile](#)) in U.S. Vogue, the in-store boutiques at [Galleries Lafayette](#) and [Selfridges](#), the high-profile hires from Burberry to L.V.M.H.

Equally prominent, in that [first unveiling](#), were the watch's communication features. The Dick Tracy phone calls, the intimate "Digital Touch" messaging, the dedicated "Friends" side button: The stress, back in 2014, was on new, "subtle ways to communicate." With the Series 2 version, most of that fell away. Even the side button has been repurposed as an app-loading dock. And now it's your Activity rings – the addictive circles that track standing, movement and exercise – you're [encouraged to share](#).

The business angle of Apple's pivot to fitness isn't that interesting. The company is following its customers and the broader wearables market – where lower-cost wristbands like Fitbit are reportedly [picking up market share](#). The Nike+ deal isn't an aspirational bid to tap an underserved market. Instead, right now at least, exercise tracking is the reason consumers are buying smart watches and "basic" wearables like the Fitbit.

The intriguing thing about Apple's shift in marketing is its elevation of self-improvement over self-expression. The original watch was promoted as a custom display of personal style – as an identity statement on par with clothing. Cook [described the original watch](#) as the "most personal device Apple has ever created," and the device's [web copy](#) reinforced the point: Apple Watch is "more than a tool. It's a true expression of your personal taste." Or, in a [later rendition](#): "From the way it works to the way it looks, Apple Watch isn't just something you

wear. It's an essential part of who you are."

The [new web copy](#), however, drops all the expressive language: The Series 2 Watch is "designed for all the ways you move," full of features that "help you stay active, motivated and connected."

Apple switches its flavor of self-help

The shift represents a victory of one mode of self-help over another. As sociologist Micki McGee observed in [Self-Help, Inc.](#), a pair of ethics have long competed in the American self-improvement market, one emphasizing self-mastery and the other self-discovery. Think [Tony Robbins](#) versus Oprah Winfrey: Robbins asks us to treat ourselves as objects to (relentlessly) work on, while Winfrey preaches meditative fulfillment.

Each ideal, in turn, [draws on a different strand of Western individualism](#) : the notion that the self is something we own, versus the competing idea that the self is to be discovered and expressed. The first ethic, the [possessive individualism](#) of philosopher John Locke, helped provoke the second notion of self discovery, as expressed in the [literary and artistic Romanticisms](#) of the 19th century. Since then – for [over a century in the American case](#) – these two ideals have been hitched to selling consumer goods.

Apple has traditionally wrapped its products in the second ideal of self-expression and discovery: the iconic [1984 sledgehammer ad](#), the "[Think Different](#)" and "[I'm a Mac/I'm a PC](#)" campaigns, [candy-colored iMacs](#) and all those [silhouetted iPod dancers](#). Apple is selling the Series 2 Watch, by contrast, on the self-mastery ethic. It's less "[Here's to the crazy ones](#)" and more [lap-counts and "achievement" badges](#).

What's novel about Apple's move is that self-discipline is getting

delegated to a device. In a sense, watch wearers are outsourcing their superegos to a publicly traded company, the world's most valuable. With every tap-to-stand and Activity report – "[a nudge when you need it](#)" – the watch becomes more like a personal trainer, one coded by Apple engineers. By baking in fitness-sharing ("[Healthy loves company](#)"), the new watch appeals to social comparison and competition too – "whether it's to send encouragement or a little smack talk." And Apple's exercise-centric messaging is built around [quantitative self-monitoring](#), via bar graphs and calorie counts and beats-per-minute tallies. The Series 2 "tracks all the ways you move throughout the day," reads new [web copy](#). "Select up to five metrics to view at once."

Exercise is a good thing. But we shouldn't pretend the design and promotion of devices like the Apple Watch are value-neutral. By the time they're slotted under flawless in-store glass, they already have a [set of ideals preinstalled](#). In the Apple Watch case, those values reflect their California origins: Our selves are objects to work on, to sculpt and measure, in competition with others. Indeed, the watch echoes the subculture of [dedicated self-quantifiers](#), who – to a deliberate extent – define themselves in metrical terms.

The watch's new "[Breathe](#)" app is a fascinating case in counterpoint. The app, which encourages periodic deep breathing, is meant to "help you practice mindfulness every day." Here is a reminder of Silicon Valley's [long flirtation with New Age mysticism](#) – as well as the [gauzy repurposing of Buddhist meditation](#) for the self-help industry. If anything, the Breathe app is a throwback to Apple's expressivist marketing campaigns. And in that respect the new [watch](#) echoes a century-old American injunction: [If you want to get ahead, go find yourself](#).

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