
Philips and other technology firms on the wrong track, says veteran inventor

BY BERT VAN DIJK

ROTTERDAM — After a life-long career at the consumer electronics giant Philips, top Dutch researcher Kees Schouhamer Immink (56) has earned the right to issue some critical words about the firm.

Back in 1998 he left the group, disillusioned about the company's attitude towards research. He is convinced that by economising on research, Philips and other western technology companies are on the wrong track.

'Philips' audio-CD patents have run out. The ones for DVD are still valid for about fifteen years. But after that Philips will run out of steam. If you have the Chinese manufacture everything, they will want to develop things themselves. That's why you have to keep production in your own hands. You can only earn money with something when you know how to make it,' he argues.

Immink recently joined the illustrious company of Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison and Heinrich Hertz as he was inducted into the 'Hall of Fame' of the American Consumer Electronics Association. A pleasant surprise and vindication for the veteran inventor.

In the 1970s, Immink played a major role in

the development of the compact disc (CD), together with Hiroshi Ogawa of Sony, with whom he became – and still is – good friends.

They first met in Eindhoven in 1979. It was one of six groundbreaking sessions in which Philips and Sony hammered out the specifications of the CD. 'We discussed every possible technical detail. From laser frequencies to the size of the hole in the middle.'

Choosing each other's best technologies proved to be easy. 'I'll never forget the sight of Ogawa as he first arrived in Eindhoven with a box of electronics under his arm. He set up an experiment in our Natlab physics laboratory which was clearly more advanced than the technology we had developed.'

The Dutch researcher studied electrical engineering at the Technical University in Eindhoven. In 1968, he joined the optical department of Philips' Natlab. Binary code became his field of expertise, which Philips used to develop the CD and DVD.

Immink: 'At first the Natlab management wasn't interested in the CD at all. Philips only jumped on it when Sony appeared to be on to it as well. Similarly, Philips and Sony tried to stop the development of DVD, because they

wanted to milk their CD patents for as long as possible. When competitor Toshiba was having a go at it, Philips and Sony quickly sprung into action.'

According to Immink, the company owes its DVD license to IBM top man Lou Gerstner. IBM didn't like the idea of two worldwide standards. After seeing presentations from both sides, Gerstner chose the Philips/Sony DVD, because he preferred its code system.

Immink has over fifty American patents to his name, with which Philips has made over a billion dollars to date. Immink however only received one symbolic dollar per patent. 'Very frustrating,' he says. 'I am sure it must have played a part in my decision to resign.'

Immink never regretted his decision to leave Philips after 31 years. In 1999 he developed a more efficient way of digitally storing data, optimising the DVD's storage capacity. Immink acquired a patent on his invention, but needed \$100,000 to make it valid worldwide. Philips wasn't interested, so he turned to South Korea's LG, which was trying to strengthen its DVD activities.

At last Immink was paid handsomely for one of his creations.