

# Love at third sight: Commodore is reborn

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Certain brands will always draw interest in the tech industry, but working at the Commodore display during January's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Ian Matthews was still shocked by how many people wanted to talk to him.

"We were mobbed," the Commodore specialist said.

While most companies had to scramble to get noticed at the giant show, no self-respecting techie had to ask who Commodore was, even though it has been quiet in recent years. The brand has had a bumpy ride since its days as a personal computing pioneer, changing hands a number of times, but it's back once again -- this time gracing new products aimed at the digital media market.

"People were hugging our staff and thanking them for bringing the name back," said Chris Wade-West, president and chief executive officer of Commodore North America.

While many know the name, few are aware that Commodore was originally a Canadian company. It marketed the first personal computer and is still listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for having the best-selling computer of all time. Nearly 22 million of the once-ubiquitous Commodore 64 machines were sold before the company stopped production in 1994.

The original company ran into financial difficulty and disappeared, but the Commodore brand didn't die. A number of attempts have been made to revive it over the years. Dutch PC maker Tulip Computers, for example, planned to rebadge its products under

the Commodore name in 1997, but the hardware never came to market and the company abandoned the concept in 2002. It then sold the name to Yeahronimo Media Ventures (YMV), a Dutch digital media company.

"It costs so much money to build a brand now," said Paul Parkin, a principal at San Francisco-based consulting firm Salt Branding. "You hear figures of \$250-million [U.S.] to launch a new brand. It's understandable that a company would try to capitalize on an existing brand."

YMV is clearly banking on fond memories. After purchasing the Commodore name in 2004 for \$32.7-million (the deal did not include the rights to the lesser-known Amiga brand marketed by the original Commodore from 1985 to 1994), YMV rebranded itself as Commodore International Corp. Now it's starting to market a new line of Commodore hardware.

"While the previous owners just planned to put the Commodore name on ordinary PCs, YMV actually used some of the original patents and ideas from the original company," said Mr. Matthews, a Calgary-based IT professional who came to the company's attention through his website detailing the history of Commodore.

"A company is only as good as its name, and right now Commodore inspires a great deal of goodwill in a large number of people," Mr. Wade-West said. "We didn't buy the name to waste that."

The original Commodores that inspired so much lingering affection were personal computers popular with game players, but the latest hardware is very

different. Perhaps the most notable new Commodore product is the Navigator, a portable global positioning system (GPS) device with 20 gigabytes of memory. It can be outfitted with an MP3 music player, video player, games, and various handheld-computer applications. The gadget should be available in Canadian electronics and department stores in June, according to Mr. Wade-West.

Although no timetable has been established, he said Commodore intends to sell "high-end MP4 players" in Canada soon. The company is selling a handheld music player called the Mpet in Europe.

"We've got ex-Sony and ex-Phillips people working on new products now," Mr. Wade-West added.

Another product that drew attention at CES was the Commodore Media Box. A combination media centre that plays CDs, DVDs and MP3s, it can record and play back digital video content. Commodore is seeking a deal with a Canadian cable provider to distribute the Media Box as part of a premium cable package, Mr. Wade-West said.

Commodore is also making a foray into commercial products and media content.