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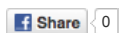
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CES: Hands On with the Kleer Wireless Earbuds

BY ROB BESCHIZZA   01.10.07 | 4:41 PM | PERMALINK

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I've been testing Bluetooth headsets for a while, because I can't stand the way headphone cords tangle and snag. But the ones I've tested have shared one big drawback: they get uncomfortable pretty quickly due to the weight of the batteries hanging from your ears. I've heard of a couple of models that sound a bit lighter, but the headphones would still have to be connected, ruling out an independent earbud design.
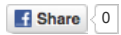
Kleer, having operated in stealth mode for the past four years, showed off their new wireless earbuds that forgo Bluetooth for a 2.4 GHz digital RF signal that can be sent to each earbud wirelessly, obviating the need for a wire connecting the two. And these suckers are small – not much larger than traditional wired earbuds. Still, neither of those things would matter if they didn't sound good. I tried Kleer's reference earbuds on today at Kleer's booth, and am happy to report that they sound excellent. These are the wireless earbuds I have been waiting for, and they're only going to get better when more polished designs start showing up (I think they could use a rubber seal for sound isolation and remaining lodged in joggers' ears).

There are a number of keys to Kleer's ability to provide such an advanced wireless earbud. With the idea of keeping battery weight to a minimum, they designed the earbuds to use as little power as possible, and it appears they succeeded. The model I tried is rated for five hours, which is more than enough considering that they can't be used on planes anyway (Kleer is also working on a 10 hour model that's slightly bigger, which Thomson/RCA will include with its Jet Stream player later this year).

The transmitter has 16 channels to switch between, which helps avoid interference. My main worry with these earbuds was that they use the same frequency as Wi-Fi and would encounter interference, but these things sounded great even on the wireless-intensive CES show floor (if they work there, they'll work anywhere). The transmitter uses lossless compression (16-bit, 44.1KHz), the data rate maxes out at 2.37 MB/sec, and multiple listeners can listen to the same transmitter at the same time. When I paused the iPod Nano the transmitter was connected to, I determined that the latency was under a quarter of a second or so, eliminating another potential problem with these earbuds.

At a CES that many have found to be underwhelming from an innovation perspective, the Kleer earbuds gave me the only "aha!" moment I've had here yet. Kudos to Kleer, and also to Thomson/RCA for realizing the value of including them with the Jet Stream.

-Eliot Van Buskirk

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