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Sony: Paramount will come back to Blu-ray camp

Pocket-lint chats to Rachel Banin, Sony's home video product manager

by Katie Scott published on 12 December 2007

As the Blu-ray camp celebrates the sale of the millionth Blu-ray disc movie, Pocket-lint chats to Rachel Banin, product manager of the home video business group at Sony to get an industry insider's perspective of what this means for the format war as a whole, and her thoughts on the future for Blu-ray and HD DVD, including an interesting take on Paramount's current stance.



Pocket-lint: Congratulations for hitting the one million Blu-ray discs sold milestone, that's a great achievement...

Rachel Banin: It is an important milestone because we are very much in the Blu-ray camp when it comes to HD. This helps indicate where the market is going and reinforces the fact that Blu-ray is establishing itself as the next HD format.

PL: How long do you think it will be before the next million discs are sold?

RB: Sales of hardware will determine how quickly the next million discs are sold. Combined sales of PS3 consoles and standalone Blu-ray players, expected to be a million units by the end of 2007, will drive the software sales.

We think that in 2008 people will really start to build their collection of HD titles.

PL: When will Blu-ray players be as affordable as HD DVD players? And when will the UK get a £200 Sony Blu-ray player?

The pricing on these products is really defined by market demand. What we firmly believe is that the Blu-ray firmware and equipment are of better quality than HD DVD.

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We can of course expect price erosion to take place over the coming months. We will expect to see in general prices coming down further as we target a more mass audience for HD equipment.

But, I can't comment on whether we will reach the same prices as HD DVD.

As far as the first £200 Blu-ray player goes, I absolutely can't comment on that. The lowest price point in the market at the moment is £350 and while that's premium compared to a PS3, it is a price that fits the consumer segment that we are targeting. At the moment, we are still very much in the early adopter phase.

PL: Many have said Blu-ray's high cost puts off consumers, do you see the price-point as important?

RB: There's certainly an earning curb effect and you experience that in every segment of consumer electronics.

The first DVD players were around £400 but very quickly came down in price as the manufacturers become more expert in producing the product, the price of components will then come down with economies of scale, and so then the price of the product comes down as well.

We can expect the same thing that happened with DVD to happen with Blu-ray.

People seem happy to pay. They are investing in products that they know will deliver a superior experience so actually for them, that price point is value for money.

I think among the majority of customers who are aware of the HD revolution, there is a wait and see attitude. At the moment, the only real way to get HD content onto your HDTV is in movie format using a HD DVD or Blu-ray player.

People who really want HD content will probably

not wait on the outcome of the format battle. They will be driven mostly by the availability of what they want to see and which movie studios have gone with which format.

PL: On the subject of studios, why is Paramount still listed on the Sony Blu-ray PR info as a Blu-ray backing studio?

RB: From my point of view, I would say that we have the majority of the Hollywood support. We have five out of the seven major studios supporting the format.

The announcement from Paramount [nb: to go HD DVD only] came as quite a surprise to us, as software sales are very much geared towards the Blu-ray disc format.

The sales data that we are getting through is showing us on a monthly basis that the ratio of sales is 4:1 in favour of Blu-ray.

But, Paramount switched allegiance. We understand that it was only for a set period of time. I think that if the progress of the Blu-ray format continues, Paramount will have to come back.

PL: When will the UK see a "Bonus View" enabled Sony player?

RB: Sony has something on its roadmap called BD Live, which allows somebody who is enjoying a Blu-ray disc title with additional content to enjoy those interactive options - alternative endings, commentaries, etc. This feature is not in our current products but it could be in the next generation.

PL: So, when can we expect to see a Sony Blu-ray player with a HDD?

RB: That's in discussion at the moment, we are certainly looking at a player that incorporates some kind of recording capability. The question is what kind of encoding do we want to put into that product.

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At the moment, there's not a lot of HD broadcast content out there so it's probably not the right time to launch an HD recorder but it may be that a standard def recorder in a Blu-ray disc drive will appeal to customers. That is something that we are in the process of researching at the moment.

PL: How confident are you that the "Buy Blu" message for this Christmas isn't just going to end up hurting early adopters?

RB: It's a similar situation with every new technology. People who purchased LCD at the beginning will now find that the quality in the marketplace is better and the prices are lower, and that's kind of the nature of the industry if you like.

I think people realise this when they purchase equipment. It's the same as when you buy a PC. You know several months down the line that the price will be lower and the specs improved and I don't think it's any different than that.

PL: And finally, would you say there is actually a difference in the image quality from a Blu-ray player and an HD DVD player?

RB: As it is possible to buy these devices next to each other playing the same movie to compare, let's accept the fact that both of them deliver output in 1080p so they are both playing high definition movie content, there is no big difference in image quality.

But what you may find is that there are functionality type differences within the formats themselves. You can talk about capacity of raw data and the bit rate transfer speed of the two formats. And by looking at these, I think the average consumer can choose which format they think they want for the future...