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Schoolgirls are calling the shots in the world of Japanese market research, and businessmen are hanging on their every word.

And for couch potatoes everywhere, Panasonic's new television set finally ensures you'll never have to lift a finger again

By the time you read this month's column, a potentially momentous event in the world of technology will probably have passed most of us by. I'm talking about i-mode, the great totem of Japan's mobile telecoms industry, which should just be taking its first tentative steps in Europe.

Dutch carrier KPN, in conjunction with service originator NTT DoCoMo, is due to launch its version 'in the spring'. Precise details of the rollout have remained shrouded in secrecy but, if KPN manages to recruit even a fraction of the 30 million subscribers that DoCoMo had reached by the end of 2001 back home in Japan, it'll be in for a bumper year – prep your stockbroker now.

Thank heavens for little girls

Other European ventures looking to launch particularly risky products in today's, unpredictable market might want to take a leaf out of the Japanese corporate handbook. The current vogue in prelaunch product testing has seen squadrons of teenage schoolgirls join the rank-and-file salarymen in major companies such as Panasonic and

Bandai to give their opinions on everything from mobile phones to cash machines.

Based on the belief that girls give their opinions much more readily than boys do, market researcher Boom Planning Co has recruited crack squads of high-school girls – 8,000 at the last count – to venture forth and boldly try out product after product. Oh, how I'd love to be a fly on the wall at meetings between the typically stuffed-shirt Japanese executives and a gaggle of gabbling gyaru (image-obsessed girls).



Daughter knows best

Other reasons companies value girls' opinions so highly is because of their large networks of peers linked by mobile phone email and their traditionally strong relationships with their mothers – crucial, considering that Japanese women hold the domestic purse strings.



↑ (top) Every schoolgirls' dream is coming true in Japan – test out a variety of hi-tech devices and report back the results

↑→ (above and right) If you're after the ultimate visual experience, and have £4,000 to spare, then Matsushita's new 36in digital TV is a must



Matsushita has sent the national incidence of couch potatoism soaring in an instant by introducing a voice-activated handset

Given the contagious popularity of the technique, it's surprising that it has taken this long for Japanese businesses to cotton on to the fact that in the land where 'cute' is king, schoolgirls are the perfect barometer of what's hot and what's not.

The thick end of the wedge

One possible beneficiary of the schoolgirls' wisdom is Matsushita, better known in the UK as Panasonic, which has just released the most unusual piece of consumer electronics I've seen since the mop bucket that rinses mops with sonic pulses.

The company's BS Digital HDTV is a 36in digital high-definition TV (that's a massive, crystal-clear telly to you and me) costing the thick end of £4,000. It features a built-in satellite TV receiver and an 80GB hard disk for recording up to 70 hours of, sadly execrable, Japanese television.

Screaming at the television

That's spiffing stuff indeed, but the focus of my attention is reserved for the remote control unit. Matsushita has sent the national incidence of couch potatoism soaring in an instant by introducing a voice-activated handset.

No more tiring button pressing – just say the word and it shall be done. Volume up, fast forward, surf the channels please – whatever you want your new goggle box to do now requires little more effort than breathing. Thank you Panasonic – the world is a better place. ■