

# Microsoft to sell fuel cells?

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Microsoft to sell fuel cells?

Need a light and a couple of songs? Microsoft might have the thing for you.

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Someday soon, there could be a gas-powered music player.

Medis Technologies has started shipping its 24-7 fuel cells for portable devices. The first customer is Microsoft, which will brand the fuel cells under its own name, according to Medis.

The fuel cells from Medis create electricity by putting liquid methanol in contact with oxygen and a membrane. Catalysts inside the membrane, usually platinum, then strip an electron from the methanol. The electron gets used to power a portable device. Byproducts include water and carbon dioxide.

Toshiba, Samsung, MIT Micro Fuel Cells and PolyFuel also have all been working to bring fuel cells for portable electronics to market. Liquid fuel is fairly efficient, and a filled fuel cell can keep devices running, manufacturers say, for a longer time than a single battery charge. (Methanol fuel cells were also used in curling irons in the '90s). Many times, however, manufacturers have delayed the release of their fuel cells because of performance issues and skepticism among consumers.

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Refilling fuel cells has also been an issue. Most manufacturers say they plan to sell cartridges at stores filled with methanol that can be inserted into the fuel cell, sort of like putting an ink cartridge into a fountain pen. Terrorism doesn't help either. The FAA earlier

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approved bringing some types of methanol fuel cells on planes, but that was before the ban on liquids in the cabin.

Although fuel cells can substitute for batteries, most manufacturers say they plan to use fuel cells to supplement batteries inside consumer electronic devices.

It's unclear how Microsoft plans to integrate fuel cells into its product line or whether the company is just buying fuel cells to test them out. Zune, however, is a likely candidate. MP3 players do not consume inordinate amounts of power and can operate independently on fuel cells. Fuel cell phone prototypes also exist. Fuel cells for running larger devices, such as laptops, can require additional components such as pumps.

Microsoft could not be reached at press time, but Medis was very up front that the software giant was a customer.

"This is an historic moment for our company," Robert K. Lifton, CEO of Medis, said in a prepared statement. "It marks the first commercial sales of our 24-7 Power Pack product and indeed, the first commercial sales in quantities of any consumer fuel cell product. We are pleased to be able to serve Microsoft as our first customer."

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