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Cambridge Shines in Silicon Valley Financial Times

'The engineers and designers who comprise Cambridge Design Partnership play up their image as quirky innovators for whom a coffee break is another excuse to bounce off-the-wall ideas at each other. In practice, their approach is astute, commercially flexible and almost clinically risk-averse. Both traits have endeared them to the Silicon Valley companies who now provide CDP with 70 per cent of its business.

CDP has an ability to extract commercial success from apparent failure. Now almost 10 years old, it created in the 1990s what was arguably the first personal MP3 player. It combined MPEG audio compression with flash memory to produce what was billed as the world's smallest hi-fi system.

But, as Mike Cane, Founder Director, recalls, it was the right product at the wrong time: "There was a lot of litigation going on as the record companies were trying to work out how to protect compact disc sales from people sharing tracks over the internet. Their strategy was to go after the manufacturers of the players."

None of the big consumer electronics companies wanted to take up the device. But Antenna Audio, then based in London and now in Sausalito, California, made contact alerted by publicity for the "Micro-fi." A specialist in

technology for museums and art galleries, it was looking for a better audio guide. CDP added a new, toughened casing and screen and a charging rack and the Micro-fi became the "X-plorer" audio tour player, capable of exhausting the most ardent museum-goer with up to 130 hours worth of installed commentaries. Some 50,000 have been shipped so far.

This approach appealed to Raja Bose, head of the UK subsidiary of Pelikan Technologies, a Silicon Valley-based manufacturer of hand-held medical equipment. The company had been developing an automated system for blood glucose testing, an essential part of a diabetic's daily routine. It had been unsuccessful in finding a research and development partner in Silicon Valley, despite sounding out world-class names.

CDP's success with Pelikan led to contracts with other Silicon Valley companies, their identities protected by confidentiality agreements. Mr Cane says: "These are big clients." It has worked for other US companies including the toy-maker Fisher Price, now part of Mattel, for which it designed a child's digital camera, and Willett America, the ink-jet printer maker. With turnover next year expected to be more than £2m, the company has always been profitable and self-financing.' *John Cane 2006*