

Las Vegas glitters with next-generation gadgets

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Image: Two attendees look at a display of Aquos flat screen televisions

The world's biggest electronics fair opened Thursday with high-definition televisions, next-generation DVD players and all-in-one communication tools blazing a trail for the digital future.

Spread around five sites in glitzy Las Vegas, the 2006 International CES (Consumer Electronics Show) boasts 2,500 exhibitors and hopes to attract 130,000 visitors before closing Sunday.



Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates set the tone in a keynote address late Wednesday by describing the current era as "the decade of digital lifestyles, the decade of digital work styles".

"That means that all these tools are becoming mainstream," he said.

For the Consumer Electronics Association, the show's organiser, high-definition (HD) TV sets are a highlight of this year's fair.

"This year 2006 will be the year of high-definition TV," CEA president Gary Shapiro said, predicting HD sets will outsell traditional analogue TVs for the first time as countries switch over to digital signals.

One of the industry glitterati attending the CES, Sony chairman Howard Stringer, said the era when television networks and other entertainment providers could foist their products on a captive audience was over.



"The relationship between the content and the consumer has been turned upside down. Content is pulled by the way they want it and where," he said.

Besides Microsoft's Xbox 360 games console, Gates touted Windows Vista, the company's new operating system due out later this year featuring faster interaction with multimedia tools such as cellphones and computers on a user's home and office network.

Microsoft also used the CES to announce it was joining forces with US telecommunications giant Verizon to market Internet-friendly cordless telephones that will offer instant messaging through MSN Messenger.

That came after free online telephone pioneer Skype announced a partnership with Netgear to offer connection-free cordless Internet handsets.

Search titan Google is rumoured to be hitting back at the all-in-one digital world proffered by Microsoft with its own suite of online tools to

enable users to download TV shows and popular software in a single package.

And while Stringer's Sony battles to recapture its lost edge in home electronics, its Japanese rival Toshiba said at the CES that it plans to steal a march by launching high-definition DVD players in the United States in March.

HD DVD technology promises cinematic quality images and new possibilities in interactive entertainment.

But rival groups headed by Sony and Toshiba have rebuffed Hollywood appeals to come up with a single format for the next generation of home video, threatening a reprise of the VHS-Betamax wars lost by Sony in the late 1970s.

Other technologies on show at the CES represent a refinement of existing technologies as manufacturers cram ever-more wizardry into ever-smaller devices.

South Korea's Samsung is touting a small music player equipped to receive satellite radio signals, one of several MP3 devices hoping to topple the Apple iPod from its best-selling throne.

Sanyo of Japan has added HD video to its ultra-thin line of camcorders. Taiwan's Axion is pushing its new wide-screen portable DVD player. Hewlett-Packard joined a growing band of computer makers to offer a laptop with built-in broadband networking for users on the go.

"Consumers want the best, quicker and cheaper," Shapiro summed up.

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