

Home appliances get 'smart' at CES

January 8 2011, by Charlotte Raab

Mobile phones aren't the only things getting smart. Home appliances are too.

On display at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) here along with the latest smartphones and touchscreen tablet computers are ovens, dishwashers, washing machines, dryers, refrigerators and other products for the "connected" home.

South Korea's LG Electronics is attracting the most buzz on the home front with its line of "Thingq" household appliances which are connected to a home Wi-Fi network and can be controlled by a smartphone or a computer.

LG refrigerators with touchscreen LCD displays let users keep tabs on where food items have been placed in the machine and when they expire.

"You can use a drag and drop system with icons or voice commands," said Patrick Steinkuhl, product insight manager at LG Electronics USA.

"You can say things like 'Ground beef top shelf.' It has default expiration dates built in but if you want to change those you can," he said. "You're in complete control."

An owner of the LG refrigerator can access its contents while shopping via a smartphone and figure out, for example, whether they need to pick up another gallon of milk or orange juice.

"I have the ability to see what's in my fridge from my phone," Steinkuhl said.

"We're connecting devices that have never been connected before and we're connecting them to you," he said.

"In the past we had the technology to do this but we never had the infrastructure to support the technology," he said. "Now we're there.

"We have the capacity to support smartphones and smart software and Wi-Fi is a very strong way to connect," Steinkuhl said.

LG is also displaying an oven that can access a home computer server, download preprogrammed recipes and display them on a screen built into the front of the machine.

"It shows all of the ingredients and the cooking process," Steinkuhl said. "And when my roast is finished cooking it will a message to my phone that says 'Your roast is done.'"

LG is also showing off washing machines that can be instructed to run at the most cost-effective times and a camera-equipped robot vacuum cleaner, the Hom-Bot, that can be told remotely to start cleaning the floor.

The camera embedded in the robot can also be used to keep an eye on the house while the owner is away.

US home appliance giant General Electric is making its first appearance at CES to show off its home energy management solutions including "Nucleus," which gives consumers information about electricity consumption.

Nucleus, which is expected to be available later this year, works with smart meters, smart appliances, programmable thermostats and software applications to help homeowners monitor their usage and reduce their electricity bills.

Joseph McGuire, the president of the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers, said US government energy standards -- and tax credits for energy efficient appliances -- were a big driver for innovation in the sector.

Ultimately, though, it's consumers who will decide, he said, with the ability to cut down on electricity bills a prime motivating factor.

It's not just the standard household items such as washers and dryers which are taking advantage of the latest technology, other home devices on display here are too.

Cedric Hutchings, co-founder of Withings, a French start-up showing off a baby monitor, a blood pressure monitor and other products at CES, said smart devices are opening up all kinds of new possibilities for the home.

The Withings baby monitor features a camera equipped with night vision that can send pictures and audio to an iPhone or any other device with a connected screen.

A microphone allows parents to talk to the child from another room and they can be awoken by alarms if a baby's sleep is disrupted.

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