60-second review: Auto-vacuuming robots

January 6 2011, By Bridget Carey

The Neato Robotic XV-11 Vacuum Cleaner

This column kicks off our series on gadgets to help you achieve your New Year's Resolution. Today's review: the latest in auto-vacuuming robots to aid our lazy readers who resolve to have a cleaner home. One is the Roomba, which you've heard of, and one you probably haven't heard of, the Neato.

Both are good choices for maintaining clean floors, but they're not perfect. To decide which to get, we compare their features:

-Price: Same. The Neato is $399, and the Roomba version 570 can be found online for the same price.

-Size: Very similar. The Neato is just a tad bit taller because it has a laser on top that can "see" walls and obstacles to map out the whole room.

Both were able to get under my furniture.

-Automated: Both have an auto-scheduling system, won't fall down stairs and will return to their charging base when finished.

-Brushes: The Roomba has two brushes, one bristle and another rubber. The Neato only just has the rubber beater brush.

-Maintenance: The Neato is easier to clean since the dirt bin is contained. Roomba's slide-out bin can cause dirt and dust to fly when opened. The Roomba's brushes have more pieces to take apart to untangle hair.

-Communication: The Roomba will speak in a female voice or beep if there is an error, such as needing to clean the brushes (which happened often for me). The Neato tells you on an LCD screen, and offers cute messages such as "please put me down" or "Thank you for cleaning my trash bin."

-Blocking a room: With the Roomba, you have to set up battery-powered towers to have it avoid an area or pull it toward a room. With the Neato, you have to lay down pieces of a thin, black magnetic strip in areas you don't want it to go into.

-Cleaning pattern: Here is where the most significant difference lies. The Roomba randomly zig-zags all over rooms like a manic sugar-overloaded 5-year-old, ramming into furniture and walls. The front bumper was covered in scuff marks within in a few minutes. When leaving it to do my entire downstairs floor, the Roomba went over some spots multiple times, but barely touched others. (And one time it didn't even bother going into my kitchen.) After a little over an hour, it returned to its base.

The Neato's laser sensor maps out the room, furniture and door frames.

It barely ever touches the furniture since it can "see" it. It'll go over the perimeter once, then neatly cover the rest of the room in straight lines, like a carpet Zen garden. It'll only go over each spot once, but finished the entire floor in a half-hour.

But the Roomba's brazen attitude towards furniture was a benefit in cleaning between my blinds for the sliding glass door. The Neato saw the blinds as a wall and didn't push to clean the few inches behind them.

-Cleaning quality: Both filled up their bins with loads of dust, pet hair and debris. But the Roomba's duo of a bristle brush and rubber squeegee has potential to grab up more hair than the Neato - although the brush required more frequent maintenance to clean.

-Cleaning speed: The Neato and the Roomba travel at about the same speed, but the Neato finishes cleaning every area of the floor much faster than the Roomba. To go over my entire living room, kitchen, guest bathroom and den, the Neato took a half hour. The Roomba stopped after an hour and repeated some areas.

-The verdict: Neither will clean as well as a human with a stand-up vacuum cleaner and a hose, since corners and edges don't get a good clean. These are designed for maintenance. That said, they both will help keep your home cleaner, but I prefer the Neato. The Neato just gives me more piece of mind. I know it's covered the whole floor, it requires less maintenance to clean brushes if I set it when I'm away, the dirt bin won't fling dust around when I remove it, and it's not hurling itself at my furniture.

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