

TVs you can talk to, without sounding crazy

January 9 2012, By PETER SVENSSON , AP Technology Writer



Workers set up a flat screen display at the Samsung exhibit for the Consumer Electronics Show, Monday, Jan. 9, 2012, in Las Vegas. The 2012 International CES trade show, the world's largest consumer electronics exhibition starts Tuesday. (AP Photo/Julie Jacobson)

Talking to the TV is usually a sign of extreme agitation, mental instability or loneliness. TV manufacturers are set to make it a more rational behavior this year, with a range of sets that respond to speech.

LG Electronics on Monday said it will sell a remote with its high-end flat-panel TVs that contains a microphone. You'll be able to speak into the microphone to enter text on the TV for Twitter updates and Web searches. You still won't be able to change the channel or control the volume by yelling at the TV.

Samsung Electronics also said it would have TVs that responded to voice commands. In addition, it's launching its first TV with a built-in camera.

As you watch the ES8000 set, it will watch you back, looking for hand gestures that prompt it to move the onscreen cursor or launch apps.

The two Korean rivals were the first to show new models at a preview day ahead of the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, which opens Tuesday. The show will feature many variations of so-called "smart" or Web-connected TVs.

"Smart" TVs have been around since 2008, but two things are holding them back. One is that the conventional TV remote is a hopeless tool for Web browsing, typing, and other PC-like behaviors.

"Anyone who's actually checked email on a 50-inch TV knows it's not a good experience," said Shawn Dubravac, head of research at the Consumer Electronics Association, which puts on the show.

As TVs become increasingly complex, more buttons are popping up on remotes. But that's a trend that can't continue, Dubravac said. TV makers are now looking for alternatives. Last year, LG introduced a "Magic Wand" remote that's motion-sensitive, much like a game-console controller. This year, it's taking another page from Microsoft Corp.'s Kinect game console and introducing a 3D camera that perches on top of a TV and interprets viewers' motions, letting them control the on-screen cursor with hand movements.

"I think 2012 will be the year of the interface," Dubravac said.

Samsung will be using its built-in cameras to try to recognize who's in front of the TV. It will then bring up the right household member's personalized "hub" of applications.



LG Electronics USA showed the new large-screen Cinema 3D Smart TV line-up Monday, Jan. 9, 2012, a day ahead of the opening of the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.(AP Photo/LG Electronics USA)

The other thing holding back "smart" TV: Viewers interact more with the cable or satellite set-top box than they do with the TV itself. The set-top box is where you find shows and change the channel.

Cable and satellite companies seem far less interested in revamping how people interact with their boxes. Dish Network Corp. unveiled a new box it calls the "Hopper" on Monday. It takes digital video recording to a new level by automatically recording all primetime shows of the four major networks. But it comes with a conventional remote, covered in buttons.

The renewed focus on smart TVs comes as TV makers are scrambling for new features to interest buyers. U.S. TV sales are in decline after a rush to upgrade to high definition and flat panels abated.

Amid the slowdown, Asian TV makers tried to make 3-D a "must-have" feature, but that effort has fallen flat. Leichtman Research Group conducted a survey that found 80 percent of Americans have heard of 3-D TVs, but just 5 percent of intend to buy one.

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