

Now that you have a smartphone, it's time for a smart home

April 12 2012, By Troy Wolverton

You've got a smartphone and maybe a smart TV, and may have heard that smart refrigerators are in the works. Next up: the smart home.

Processing power and [network connections](#) are transforming daily life, so it should come as no surprise that such technologies may soon improve the places where we live.

The "[smart home](#)" is a catch-all term for a collection of technologies designed for a broadband-connected house. They allow consumers to monitor and control appliances and locks, and to automate particular tasks, such as controlling the temperature.

For most consumers, the smart home has been little more than a futuristic fantasy. Sure, some affluent families already have homes that they can program and use like computers to lock doors from afar, or have their alarms automatically set when everyone leaves the house. But the cost of such systems has been beyond the reach of mainstream consumers.

What's more, the complexity of such systems typically meant that they either had to be installed as a house was being built or they required a professional installer-further driving up their cost.

But that is starting to change. The cost of [sensors](#) and controllers has come down dramatically. Many devices now utilizing standard networking protocols such as Wi-Fi and ZigBee, an emerging low-power

standard for wireless data connections, allow users to more easily build out their systems.

The growing adoption of smart, connected devices such as smartphones and the spread of wired and [wireless broadband](#) is allowing users to connect to their homes with equipment they already have.

But perhaps the most important change is that smart home services are starting to be offered by companies such as ADT, [Comcast](#) and Verizon, which are making [cutting edge technology](#) more accessible by subsidizing up-front costs with longer term [subscription fees](#).

Comcast, for example, is offering a promotion on its just-launched smart home service that includes free installation of a standard set of security sensors. The offering costs about \$40 a month, which is in line with what you'd pay for standard non-smart home security services.

Of course, even if a smart home is becoming more affordable, that doesn't necessarily mean you'd want one-I'm not aware of a killer app yet for the smart home. That said, services already offer some compelling capabilities.

For example, parents can be notified by text message when their kids come home-or when they don't. Or home owners can view video recordings of everyone who has recently approached their front door. Eco-minded consumers can get smart home features that automatically turn down air conditioners when no one's around, or allow them to closely monitor electricity use within their homes.

For my part, I'd love it if my 1950s home were even a little bit smarter to make up for my own occasional lack of wits. One recent morning, I returned home after dropping my son off at school to check to see if I had locked the door. (I had.) It would have been great if I'd simply been

able to check the door's status on my [smartphone](#). Even better would be if my house would automatically lock the doors, turn off the stove, set the alarm and close the garage door when no one's home.

I'm also excited about the energy management features smart homes will offer. Consumers can already see in real-time how much overall energy they are using. But systems are being developed that will allow them to see how much electricity is passing through individual outlets-and get alerts when those outlets see extraordinary loads. That would be great for me; I'd love to know that I've left my freezer door ajar before the compressor has run all night and frosted everything within it.

So count me in-I'm ready for the smart home of the future. And I'm glad to see some features become more affordable in the present.

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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