

Robots are marching into homes

November 16 2012, by Jon Swartz

The mechanical march of robots into consumers' lives is slowly picking up pace. In recent weeks, a handful of companies have trotted out robotic devices to do everything from chasing the family cat to dream painting. One of them, or perhaps something on the horizon, could jump-start a nascent market.

"Everyone is looking for the next (Sony) Aibo," said tech analyst [Rob Enderle](#), referring to the popular pet robot in Japan that was discontinued in 2006. "The potential is in the billions for the right product."

ABI Research predicts [personal robot](#) sales will pass \$15 billion by 2015.

Driving the growth: Cheap, powerful cameras, advanced sensors and other electronics now form the foundation of robotics projects.

In the 1990s, technology was pricey and limited to industrial settings where large companies could afford to make the necessary investments. Robots have mostly been used by automakers and semiconductor firms to produce goods in high volume. They're also in vogue at some warehouses.

Home, however, is where the richest opportunity may reside. Several companies have recently weighed in with products and services:

-Bossa Nova Robotics announced Ballbot, a platform for developers to create personal robots that interact with people. Conceivably, this could lead to something like a robot maid modeled after "The Jetsons" Rosie

for less than \$5,000.

"It opens up a whole slew of uses," such as tour guides and package delivery, said co-founder Sarjoun Skaff. He said there is a "groundswell" of [robotic devices](#) that "cooperate with people."

-Romotive introduced a new version of Romo, its \$150 smartphone robot, with wheels and camera, that uses the iPhone as its brain and operates like a remote-controlled car. It is described by CEO Keller Rinaudo as "Skype on wheels." Romotive also announced \$5 million in funding from venture-capital firm Sequoia Capital.

Romo customers use it to do everything from chase the cat to monitor their kids at home, Rinaudo said.

-iRobot last month snapped up Evolution Robotics for \$74 million to round out its product line of Roomba floor cleaners.

-ABB is demonstrating a robot that interprets dreams through paintings. The [robot](#) is on display in the lobby of a Paris hotel.

The automated contraptions seem to be everywhere. A conference on robotics in Silicon Valley this week has scheduled dancing bots and a pair of life-size humanoid robots as greeters.

Consumer robots increasingly are becoming part of the American home, and may be fixtures within several years, said Manuela Veloso, an artificial intelligence and robotics professor at Carnegie Mellon University, a leading researcher in both fields. As consumers become more comfortable with robots, they "will be accepted in everyday life," she says.

Experts predict that within 10 years, general-purpose robots - costing

\$25,000 to \$30,000 per unit - will perform house chores while consumers are at work or serve as butlers at cocktail parties.

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