

Gadget makers at Consumer Electronics Show embrace connectivity

January 8 2013, by Andrea Chang

At this year's International Consumer Electronics Show, everything is getting a bit "smarter."

Smartphones ushered in the notion that cellphones didn't have to be limited to just making calls, and tablets uprooted the definition of the [personal computer](#). Now, the buzz at the world's largest tech gadget conference has shifted from the devices themselves to the growing crop of accessories and technologies that are piggybacking on their massive popularity.

Connectivity is one of the main reasons smartphones and tablets became blockbuster hits among consumers, and tech manufacturers want to bring that feature to other objects - many of them everyday, non-digital [household items](#).

So a smartphone case is no longer just about protecting your phone, a fork is not just an instrument for getting food into your mouth, and a [wristwatch](#) is about more than just a fashion statement to tell the time.

"Things are better when they're connected," said Chris Penrose, [senior vice president](#) of emerging devices at AT&T Inc. "They're smart when they're connected, they're dumb when they're not."

LG Electronics Inc. on Monday rolled out a line of smart appliances that can connect to and be controlled by users' smartphones or smart televisions. The smart appliances include a refrigerator, an oven, a

vacuum robot and a washer. For example, a smart TV can be used to pause a washing cycle.

Another product getting an upgrade is the smartphone case. The new Sensus iPhone case, a plastic covering no bulkier than a typical protective smartphone case, incorporates a processor and sensors that add touch-screen sensitivity to the back and sides of the iPhone.

"At any given time, statistically speaking, the thumbs and fingers are covering about 25 percent to 33 percent of the screen," said Ian Spinelli, a marketing coordinator at Canopy Co. in Minneapolis, which manufactures the Sensus case. "When you're covering the screen, especially with games and other things, you can't see what's going on."

The case snaps on to the phone, and users can play games by touching the back of the case and scroll through text by sliding a finger down the side of the case. Instead of awkwardly pressing on the glass surface of the touch screen to snap a photo, users can press on the side, much like they would with a digital camera.

Another sensor-equipped item is the "smart electronic" Hapifork, designed to vibrate in diners' hands when they chow too quickly. Creator Hapilabs has also made a similar spoon.

The tech-filled utensils are fitted with sensors that track how often they're placed inside someone's mouth. Too many lip trips in too short a time span - say, three in a minute - causes the handle of the fork or spoon to gently pulsate. Users can program the devices to buzz at a personalized pace.

"You can be told to eat slowly, but you usually forget," inventor Jacques Lepine said. "This way, your mind doesn't have to do the work."

Even information placards at museums are getting a digital boost, with 3M showing off an air-hockey-table-sized touch-screen table that will enable museum-goers to have a more interactive experience with art and science exhibits.

The irony, though, is that as products become packed with more features and can connect to one another and to the Internet, they often become more confusing to consumers, said Scott Steinberg, an innovation consultant at TechSavvy and longtime CES attendee.

"Just because we can add these features doesn't mean we should, because many [consumers](#) are confused by the poor user experience provided," he said. People are used to passively interacting with their products, so "the key challenge is to educate the consumer on what the benefits are."

The annual CES convention kicked off Sunday with events for the media. The show officially begins Tuesday, with 3,200 exhibitors expected to demo their latest [gadgets](#) and gizmos in 1.9 million square feet of exhibition space at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

During a media briefing Sunday, the [Consumer Electronics](#) Association, which runs CES, said global spending on consumer electronic devices is projected to hit \$1.1 trillion in 2013, with tablets and smartphones accounting for 40 percent of that tally.

That sum would represent about 4 percent growth from 2012 and reflect a turnaround of sorts from last year, when spending unexpectedly fell about 1 percent, said Steve Koenig, senior director of market research for CEA.

The opening of CES also brought out major TV announcements by LG, Sharp Electronics Corp., Panasonic Corp. and Samsung Electronics Co.

Sharper screen resolutions and advancements in Internet-connected televisions were the focus for the TV behemoths. Ultra-high-definition sets, also known as 4K, were front and center for many brands, including Samsung, which announced massive 85-inch and 110-inch versions.

Despite the hype around ultra-high-definition TVs, a lack of content, high prices and consumer ambivalence could signal slow growth for the budding category.

CEA projects only 23,000 ultra-HD sets will be sold in the U.S. this year. By 2016, that number will reach close to 1.5 million, for about 2 percent of the television market, the group estimated.

"We're not expecting this to be a technology that ramps very quickly," said Shawn DuBravac, CEA's chief economist.

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Citation: Gadget makers at Consumer Electronics Show embrace connectivity (2013, January 8)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2013-01-gadget-makers-consumer-electronics-embrace.html>

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