Troy Wolverton: Dreaming of a smarter home

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I have a decidedly dumb house. Don't get me wrong, I love my home. It's well insulated, quiet and comfortable.

And it's not like I'm living in the Dark Ages. I have energy-efficient bulbs - even a handful of the new LED ones - in nearly every socket. I've got a pricey and sleek late-model Bosch refrigerator. And, of course, I have all kinds of connected gadgets.

But my home is simply not smart. It doesn't know when I'm home, doesn't allow me to remotely adjust my lighting or my thermostat and certainly doesn't tell me when I haven't locked my doors.

My refrigerator doesn't tell me when I'm out of milk, and I can't turn on my washer from my living room. And you can forget about having my house coordinate anything like adjusting the temperature, unlocking the doors and opening the garage when I come home at night.

Nor did I expect anything different. Dating to 1953, my house was built before "The Jetsons," much less the latest in home automation technology.

But I do hope to make my house smarter. My wife and I both frequently forget whether we've locked doors or closed the garage. It would be great to have a system that told us.

As the person in our house whose job it is to check the house before we

go to sleep, I'd also love to have a nighttime "shut down" button that secures all the doors and turns off all the lights at once. And with my oldest kid's teenage years in sight, I'd love to have a system that will alert me if he hasn't arrived home by a certain time - without me having to stay up and wait for him.

With the latest home automation technology, our house could do all this and more. But smart-home technology still has a way to go before it's really ready for our home - and we're ready for it.

I recently took a step to make our house a bit smarter, installing a security camera system. But it's been a decidedly mixed experience.

The new cameras are reassuring. We now have a much better sense of what's going on at our house when we're not around.

But I'm not sure how much smarter the cameras have made me or my house. Thanks to them, I now know when the stray cats wander by in the middle of the night, when the mail carrier comes to my house each day and when my wife takes the dog out - each time she does it.

Also thanks to the cameras, my wife found out, while at her office, that I had gotten flowers delivered to the house for Valentine's Day. It kind of spoiled the surprise, but at least she knew I was thinking about her.

I'm hoping to add other home automation features. But the costs and limitations of the services have given me pause.

Yes, you can get a basic home automation system for as little as $200, but it frequently involves a long-term contract - or a lot of self-configuration. And the basic systems typically don't include the features that are most important to me.

Indeed, the automated locks that I'd like to get for our house can cost more than $200 a pop - and that's not including the cost of a gateway device that would allow me to connect to them over the Internet or the potential subscription costs of a service that would allow me to do that.

I'm also wary of being locked into any particular technology or service provider, especially given how young the industry is. I don't want to invest in a home automation system only to find out in a couple years that I can't upgrade it because it's become obsolete.

Unfortunately, if you want an easy-to-use system, you typically have to commit to a provider and the technology it supports. And that technology often isn't interoperable. Comcast's home automation system communicates via the ZigBee wireless standard, while ADT's system uses Z-Wave, a similar but incompatible technology. The difference means that if you tried to switch from one provider to the other, you likely would need to get all new equipment.

To be sure, things have gotten a lot better in recent years. The systems are much less expensive, far easier to install and, because you can interact with them using a smartphone, more useful.

But while I appreciate how for the technology has come, I may put up with my dumb house for a while longer - at least until the offerings and technology get a little smarter.

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

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