

Your home could soon be like the Jetsons'

January 17 2014, by Troy Wolverton

For decades, futurists have been predicting the era of the "smart" home, where you don't need to be home to lock your doors, dim your lights or adjust your thermostats. But except for the homes of the wealthy and a few hobbyists, the smart home has been a dream of the distant future. The necessary gadgets have been too expensive and too difficult to configure, and there have been few standards to ensure that the various pieces would work together.

But new products unveiled at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas last week suggest that the [smart home](#) may soon be within reach of the average American.

"We're close," said Chet Geschickter, an analyst who covers home automation services for Gartner.

Among the developments at CES:

Security provider ADT unveiled an application that allows users to turn off lights or lock doors by simply speaking commands into their smartphone. The company also announced a new wireless control panel that it says will reduce installation time and difficulty.

The Z-Wave Alliance, a trade group representing manufacturers who make home automation products that employ the Z-Wave wireless protocol, announced that there are now 1,000 products on the market that incorporate the technology, which allows users to communicate with everything from their window shades to their living room lamps.

Among the new products are an automated valve that can shut off the water pipes if the system senses a leak, and a low-cost controller that can alert homeowners if their garage doors are open and allow them to close the doors remotely.

Canary and Sen.se showed off inexpensive sensor systems that can alert homeowners when someone enters their house, or the temperature changes suddenly.

Allure Energy demonstrated an upcoming location-sensing smartphone app that works with its EverSense thermostat. Users can configure the app to tell the thermostat to turn their air conditioning on when they approach the house or turn it off when they leave.

"Both in terms of new subscribers and devices available, we're seeing growth across the board," said Jonathan Collins, who covers the smart home market as an analyst for ABI Research. "What we saw (at CES) was a broadening of what the (smart-home) platforms can be used for."

Even before the latest wave of product announcements, it was clear that the home automation market had grown beyond its hobbyist and high-end roots.

Home improvement store Lowe's, for example, is now showcasing its Iris home-automation system and related products in all of its more than 1,500 stores. Introduced in 2012, the system is sold in kits that are designed to be easy to install and allow users to remotely turn on or off appliances or receive alerts when someone has enters their home. They range in price from \$180 to \$300.

Meanwhile, Nest Labs, the Palo Alto, Calif.-based startup that makes "smart" thermostats and smoke detectors, announced Monday that it would be sold to Google Inc. for \$3.2 billion.

And in the past several years, the big telecommunications companies, notably AT&T and Comcast, have been rolling out smart home features, offering them as add-ons to their broadband services.

Until recently, most mainstream consumers either were unaware of new home automation systems or unwilling to pay the high cost of having them installed. But the entry of big companies into the space is both raising awareness of the new technology and pushing down costs.

In part, that's because the sensors and radios that underlie many home automation devices have also dropped in price. Also, smart-home products can now piggyback on other technologies. Rather than buy pricey control panels, consumers now can typically operate such systems over their existing Wi-Fi networks and Internet connections using the smartphones and tablets they already own.

Instead of having to spend thousands of dollars to have a custom installer put in a [home automation](#) system, consumers now can get one for \$30 to \$50 a month from their broadband provider.

"We've had this fundamental shift," said Shawn DuBravac, the chief economist for the Consumer Electronics Association, the industry trade group that puts on CES. Home automation devices "have gotten cheaper and smaller."

The age of the smart home "is happening," added Gartner's Geschickter, who says broadband providers will popularize the service. It's just a matter of "how they can market the service, how many homes they can sign up and how quickly and how many technicians they can get out."

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