

Gift Guide: Home products come with connectivity

December 18 2014, by Anick Jesdanun



This product image provided Withings shows the Withings Smart Body Analyzer health tracking scale. (AP Photo/Withings)

Do you really need an app to tell you to brush and floss? It seems every

household appliance is getting some smarts these days, meaning some connection to a phone app and the broader Internet. But then what?

To give you a feel for what that connectivity brings, here's a closer look at a few "smart" products for the home. There are plenty more if you look around. As I tried these out, I kept thinking to myself whether these products really needed that connectivity. You'll need to decide whether the benefits are worth the higher prices.

THE SMART TOOTHBRUSH:

I tested the Oral-B Pro 7000 SmartSeries electric toothbrush with Bluetooth connectivity. A free [app](#) that goes with it has a timer that tries to make sure you spend two minutes brushing—30 seconds on each quadrant of your teeth. The app then reminds you to brush your tongue, floss and rinse with mouthwash. It sends me notifications when I haven't been doing that consistently (oops!). The app also offers weekly and monthly charts on your brushing activities.

I was skeptical when I started using this toothbrush. It relies a lot on self-reporting. Although the toothbrush will warn when you're putting too much pressure on your teeth, it can't tell whether you're actually brushing your entire mouth. You can spend the entire two minutes on one area, even as the app tells you to move on. And flossing? I was pressed for time getting to my dentist appointment, so I told the app I flossed that morning—even though I didn't.

But after I switched back to a manual toothbrush, I found myself gradually reducing my brushing time. I also stopped flossing and doing all those other good things. The connected toothbrush won't go beyond what you can do with a timer and self-discipline, but it proves useful

when you lack both.

The model I tested isn't out in the U.S. until next month, likely for about \$220. A cheaper model, the 5000, retails for \$159 and does most of what the 7000 does, with the exception of an extra mode for tongue cleaning. Both are more expensive than the \$65 to \$100 retail prices for standard Oral-B electric toothbrushes. It's possible for family members to share the device—with different brush heads, of course—but it's cumbersome and not really designed for that.

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This product image provided by Mr. Coffee shows the Mr. Coffee Smart Optimal Brew Coffeemaker with WeMo. (AP Photo/Mr. Coffee)

THE SMART KITCHEN:

A Smart Optimal Brew edition of the Mr. Coffee coffeemaker lets you schedule brewing or start the machine remotely, such as when you're still in bed or a few minutes from the front door. It won't do the more annoying tasks of refilling the water and replacing the coffee grounds, though.

I find it takes more work to unlock the phone, open the app and launch the brewing than to walk over to the coffeemaker. If I hit the brew button just before jumping in the shower, the coffee's ready by the time I'm out. What would really make the coffeemaker smart is to observe when I shut the snooze on my phone alarm, as that's when I'm ready to get up.

I recognize that most people have bigger living spaces than I do. So if the coffeemaker is downstairs, it might be useful to start it remotely before the shower. But you can already do that with timers. To justify the smart coffeemaker, your sleeping patterns would need to be so unpredictable that you'd need to change that after you wake up.

The device costs \$250, or about \$20 more than a comparable model without the smarts. That's not a huge price difference for the benefit. The coffeemaker uses WeMo's app from Belkin, which means the coffeemaker might one day coordinate with light switches, motion sensors and other WeMo-enabled products.

Another such WeMo product is a \$130 Crock-Pot slow cooker. It allows you to adjust cooking times and temperature remotely, if you're running late from work, for instance. It's more than twice the price of a regular Crock-Pot, so it's a tougher sell than the coffeemaker. I feel uneasy about leaving a cooking appliance on all day, but the manufacturer points out that people do that with timers already, and the app lets you verify

whether you remembered to turn it off.

Both of these kitchen products feel first generation. They'll need more functionality through software updates in the future.



This product image provided Oral-B shows the Oral-B PRO 7000 SmartSeries toothbrush with Bluetooth connectivity. (AP Photo/Oral-B)

THE SMART SCALE:

Although I wanted to call Withings' Smart Body Analyzer dumb for

telling me I gained 5 pounds, I verified that with a scale at my gym. Sigh.

Once I got past that, I found it to be one of the more useful connected products. You have to stand on it for longer than a typical bathroom scale as it logs your weight, body fat, heart rate and air quality. That data will automatically transfer to an app—the same one used by other Withings' products, including a fitness tracker. The app also takes advantage of Apple's HealthKit system to sync with Apple's Health app and data from rival vendors.

Even without all that syncing, it's great to be able to track your weight over time (the heart rate, not so much, as that changes depending on whether you just exercised). I've tried over the years to track my weight with a spreadsheet, but I keep forgetting (perhaps on purpose) after stepping off the scale.

Up to eight people in a household can use the same scale. It will send readings to the right profile, based on a comparison with past weights. There's an extra step if you're similar in weight to someone else.

The multi-sensor scale retails for \$150. A version that does only weight goes for \$100. Although you can get a regular scale for much less, connectivity makes sense here. Manufacturers need to give consumers a good reason for having that connectivity—and in this case, Withings does.

More information: Toothbrush: www.oralb.com/bluetooth-toothbrush

Coffeemaker: www.mrcoffee.com/coffeemakers/BVMC-PSTX91WE.html

Scale: www.withings.com/us/smart-body-analyzer.html

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