A hitch on the way to your smart home

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Thanks to increasingly accessible and affordable home automation systems, your house will soon be able to do a lot of neat tricks.

But before you turn your dwelling into the home of the future, you'll have to make sure you have a well-matched set of devices.

Recently released or soon-to-hit-the-market devices and services will allow you to configure your air conditioner so that it starts cooling your house as you return from work, no matter what time that may be. They'll also turn off all your lights and lock all your doors as soon as your head hits your pillow at night. While at work, you'll be able to unlock the door for a child who forgot her key by simply telling your phone to let her in.

Sounds cool, right?

But there's one big hitch. In order for any of these scenarios to work, you'll have to have devices that can actually talk to each other. Many will only be able to perform these functions if you have compatible equipment in your house. If you purchase one smart home device you may find that your choices for other gadgets could be circumscribed if you want them to all work together.

"When they buy their first smart product, (consumers) have the expectation that it will work with other smart products that they will purchase in the future. But that's generally not the case," said Tom Kerber, director of research at Parks Associates, a technology consulting firm.

That dynamic was an undertone at an event Google-owned Nest held in San Francisco last week. The company demonstrated how its latest thermostats, smoke detectors and cameras will be able to work together to perform sophisticated functions.

For example, if Nest's Protect smoke detector senses carbon monoxide in the air, the Nest thermostat can automatically shut off the furnace, which is often the source of the problem. Alternatively, if a user gets an alert on their smartphone that a Protect device has sensed smoke in their house, they can use the same Nest app to check a video feed from a Nest camera to check on the problem.

But those scenarios generally only work if users have Nest equipment. Nest's thermostat doesn't talk with non-Nest smoke detectors and Nest's smoke detector doesn't talk with other smart thermostats.

And it's not just with Nest products that consumers may find compatibility problems. Apple is developing a new smarthome standard technology called HomeKit that allow users to control their lights or lock their doors using its Siri voice command technology.

But users will only be able to use Siri to control HomeKit gadgets on Apple devices like iPhones and iPads. Even then, users will only be able to use Siri with products that Apple has approved as compatible with HomeKit. Even if users have an app on their iPhone to control a smart-home device, they won't necessarily be able to use Siri with it.

And there are other examples. Lowe's offers a selection of home-automation kits under the Iris brand. Users can add non-Lowe's product on to their Iris systems, but only a handful that Lowe's has approved. Similar situations apply to smart-home devices and systems from the likes of Honeywell, Hughes, Alarm.com and more.

Sunnyvale, Calif., resident Aaron Tomaro has had first-hand experience with trying to combine systems. Tomaro, who works in Wells Fargo's home mortgage department, has become something of a smart-home enthusiast. He has a collection of Dropcam security cameras, an Amazon Echo intelligent assistant, a collection of smart lights and more. He tried to get his disparate devices to work together to do things like turn on his lights as he approached his house, but because he had equipment from different vendors, it was hard to do and didn't work very well.

"None of them really connect together," Tomaro, 30. "It's kind of annoying."

Various companies are working on technology to tie together smart-home devices. Google has a project called Brillo that's trying to offer a standard way for home automation gadgets to connect in the home and through the cloud and is pitching Android as a standard operating system that such devices could be built on.

Meanwhile, Nest has a "Works with Nest" program that allows other companies to connect their devices with its thermostats and smoke detectors through the cloud. And San Francisco startup IFTTT offers a free Web service that allows companies and consumers to create "recipes" that trigger actions on particular smart home or Internet of Things devices in response to actions taken or things detected by other gadgets.

But these are only partial solutions at best. Brillo and its associated technologies are still in development. While there are some 9,000 developers in the "Works with Nest program," there are only a couple hundred compatible products - with many major products are left out.

To some analysts, the smart home market bares a lot of resemblance to other technology markets in their infancy, like when PCs first started

hitting store shelves or local networking was becoming available. Without a standard way for devices to connect, users face the prospect that they may buy devices that could become technological dead-ends whenever a standard does emerge.

"We've seen this movie before," said Alfonso Velosa, an analyst who focuses on the Internet of Things for tech research firm Gartner.

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