

## Gizmo Guy: Alexa does makes us happy ... some of the time

March 3 2017, by Jonathan Takiff, The Philadelphia Inquirer

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How much excitement can one tech product - the voice-activated Amazon Echo and its smaller siblings Echo Dot and Tap - generate before the "don't-believe-the-hype" syndrome also sets in?

Thanks to a gangbuster holiday season, the installed base of Amazon's

smart home "virtual assistant" speakers, which answer to the wake-up call "Alexa," then do your vocal bidding, has risen to more than 8.2 million units (up from 5 mil just a few months prior), reported Consumer Intelligence Research Partners.

More than 7,000 Alexa platform skills (apps) are now ready for activation through the Amazon store, running the gamut from the sublime - Turner Sports' Catch Sports game finder, One Minute Mindfulness sound mediation - to the ridiculous: generating a Powerball number or Magic 8 Ball prediction.

At the giant January CES electronics show, you could hardly swing a bat without hitting a coming-soon product enhanced with Alexa's cheery personality and management skills - from Alexa voice-responsive, Fire TV-enabled televisions (from Westinghouse, Element, Seiki) and satellite set-top boxes (Dish), to smartened-up kitchen and laundry appliances from GE, Whirlpool, and an especially grand LG Instaview Refrigerator that's really one-third communications/entertainment center.

We also saw lots of Alexa voice-controllable door locks and garage door openers, a gazillion smart light bulbs, and several smart speakers aping the Echo's act. We were likewise taken by Samsung's latest robotic vacuum cleaner and soon-coming Ford rides with Sync 3 operating/infotainment system that let you remotely check the battery charge or pronounce "Driverless vehicles, start your engines!"

Jumping in early where others (Google, Microsoft, Apple) dallied, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has mused that the Alexa platform could soon become the fourth "pillar" of his operation, vying with the retail marketplace, Amazon Prime, and Amazon Web Services (the true earner of the company - posting \$12.2 billion in sales in 2016 and helping it attain a profit of \$2.4 billion, despite a staggering \$7 billion in retail

shipping losses).

With Amazon site connectivity baked into the Alexa software (offered free to any developers), ordering an Amazon shopping cart of stuff is just a whisper away. At least in theory.

But in practice, Gizmo Guy has run hot and cold on Alexa.

Sometimes she plays oh-so-sweetly. Helps me a lot. It's a pleasure to experience her airing of NPR's Morning Edition, with a simple "Alexa play WHYY on Tune-in" on my kitchen-countered Amazon Echo or bathroom-based Amazon Dot.

Then, at night, as my hands are preoccupied prepping dinner, it's great how she can convert recipes from mls to ozs, track a minute-by-minute countdown for flipping the fish, and keep tunes rolling as I roll out the pizza dough.

The Echo isn't as high-fi focused as other streaming speakers and stereo gear in my place, but she's far more convenient to use (perhaps the reason why Sonos is rushing to integrate Alexa voice commands into its operating system, in the next month or two).

Sometimes, though, like other women in my life, Alexa doesn't seem to understand me. In part, it could be my own fault, because I don't literally take her at her words and forget that she's not really as deep a thinker as the new diva on the block, Google Home.

If I mistakenly request "Alexa, Honeywell Lyric, make it warmer," she doesn't have a clue. Gotta murmur the thermostat's name exactly as I originally named it - "Lyric Second Floor." And even that won't always work. So then I have to check whether the thermostat has fallen off the Wi-Fi network it shares with the Echo and Dot smart speakers. That can

happen after my internet service has blinked off for more than a few seconds, or a new Wi-Fi-linked gizmo has been added to the network.

I've also found that Alexa often likes to sleep in on weekends, putting out a virtual "do not disturb" sign. Could it be because of heavy user traffic between here and where her brains reside - far off in the cloud? Or the culprit might be Wi-Fi congestion in my crowded urban zone.

Either way, the "smart" speaker sometimes just sits there on Saturday morning, acting snooty, not even acknowledging my existence with her usual come-hither hello - a cute blue ring of light that spins around the Echo when Alexa is happy to hear from me.

Gizmo Guy is at least willing to look for explanations and not just blame the messenger. Others might not be so tolerant.

In a new report on smart home speakers and their Artificial Intelligence-powered voice assistants, Voice Labs found that only a tiny fraction of users - 3 percent - stick with a smart speaker app for more than a week. And 69 percent of Alexa skills have zero or just one customer review, suggesting a serious lack of engagement.

Maybe it's because the "Tell me a stupid joke" skill wears thin fast. Or, because some smart home novices mismatch Alexa-enabled speakers with the wrong smart power switch or lightbulb or coffeemaker that was designed to play nicely with Apple Home Kit, Samsung Smart Things, Wink, et al and hasn't added Alexa connectivity. Gotta double-check that "works with" labeling!

"There are many barriers preventing mass-market smart home adoption: high device prices, limited consumer demand and long device replacement cycles," noted Business Insider Intelligence in its analysis of the Voice Labs findings. "The largest barrier is the technological

fragmentation of the smart home ecosystem, in which consumers need multiple networking devices, apps and more to build and run their [smart home](#)."

Clearly Alexa has taken the lead. But she needs to make peace and start schmoozing with all the other ladies.

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Citation: Gizmo Guy: Alexa does makes us happy ... some of the time (2017, March 3) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-03-gizmo-guy-alexa-happy.html>

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