

From Echo Auto to Alexa: Hits and misses from Amazon's new product reveal

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The Echo speakers got the most attention. And pundits had fun with a talking Alexa microwave and clock.

But the DVR and auto stick stole Amazon's new product launch show, hands down.

Amazon invited a handful of journalists to its headquarters here Thursday to show off its new line of holiday products, which will be available in October and November.

The updated portfolio of Echo-connected speakers have better sound, improved aesthetics and useful tools. I love the new whisper trick—speak softly to Alexa and she will speak softly back to you.

But I spend more time watching TV than I do whispering. And not a day goes by that I'm not usually driving.

In terms of being useful, the hits from the presentation came when Amazon hit us where we live.

—The Fire TV Recast DVR is a consumer-friendly machine for cord cutters, a way to finally record our favorite TV shows (very few DVRs are available for this) without a pesky monthly fee. Recast starts at \$229—period. Compare this to the granddaddy of DVRs, TiVo, whose Bolt box is \$199, plus \$15 monthly for service. (And most cable operators charge around \$20 to \$30 monthly to rent their DVRs.)

Spoiler alert: The Recast is strictly for cord cutters. It doesn't work with cable boxes but instead with home antennas, answering a need for those who watch broadcast shows but don't have a way to tape them.

—The Echo Auto is an ingenious little device, the size of an old iPod Nano, that plugs into the USB port in your car and your phone. Voila, you now have Alexa in the car.

I have Bluetooth in my Hyundai Elantra and can make calls and little else. I can't ask for on-demand music or podcasts, I can't request directions or local restaurants.

So I welcome this \$50 device that could do all of that, plus all those Alexa skills that theoretically would work in the car.

Alexa, find me the nearest gas station.

Alexa, where's the closest McDonald's?

Alexa, how many miles away is the nearest motel?

Those are things all of us need.

Sure, there are auto alternatives out there, most notably Apple's CarPlay and Android Auto, but they are add-ons you buy with a new car purchase or as after-purchase accessories, costing from \$299 to \$399, plus installation.

Here's a \$50 dongle that plugs into any car USB port. Where do we sign up? (Amazon is making the Auto tool available to "invite-only" customers for \$24.99 and eventually will release it to the public for \$49.99)

Of the speakers, Amazon spent much of its presentation touting prettier speakers (the Dot and Echo Plus have more style this year), but the device that's getting the biggest push is the revamped Echo Show.

This is the Echo speaker with a video monitor that started slowly when it was first introduced in 2017. The original Echo had a small 7-inch video screen, and while it originally cost \$229, you can pick up the older model now for \$129.99.

The new Echo has a 10-inch screen, improved speakers and a beefier body. Going from 7 inches to 10 inches doesn't sound like much, but trust me, this is a huge move that will be noticed in kitchens from here to Paris.

What the Echo Show now looks like is a megacomputer, a fat iPad, with a beautiful screen that could eliminate computer use or the kitchen TV for many people. And it makes video phone calls, shows lyrics from songs and lets you share your photos. That would improve life for many people—passing around the phone to view pictures is getting boring.

The knock on the Show when it launched is that there was little video available for viewing. At first, Google's YouTube was available, until a corporate spat saw Google remove it. So now Amazon has a workaround—a web browser, to watch YouTube or other online video sites.

And taking us full circle, the new Recast has more functionality than say, my DVR in that video recorded can be viewed in multiple places—the TV, phones, tablets and, of course, the Echo Show. Again, turning the Show into the small family TV.

If there were any losers from the event, it would have to be classic Echo speakers. More stylish, better sound, so Amazon says, but compared to a

talking microwave, a TV replacement for the kitchen, an affordable DVR for cord cutters and the ability to have Alexa join us on car rides, the plain, basis Echo just seems so ... yesterday.

Unless we're whispering to it, right?

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