

Commentary: 3 trends emerging at Consumer Electronics Show

January 10 2013, by Jeff Gelles

Forget for a moment all the fantastical new devices on display at the International Consumer Electronics Show.

If you're a home-theater aficionado or just have loads of cash to burn, you may want to rush out and buy an ultra-HD-TV - ignoring the fact that there's hardly any content yet available to take advantage of the advance. But the good news is that [CES](#) 2013 also showcases trends that are welcome news for the rest of us, technophiles and technophobes alike.

Here are three quick picks:

FOCUS ON SIMPLICITY: This trend is especially evident among companies that target older [consumers](#), such as Telikin. Back for a third year at the show, Telikin makes easy-to-use, touch-screen computers that perform the essentials - including e-mail, video-calling, photo-sharing, and document-handling - while dodging the complexity of a PC or the [price tag](#) of a Mac.

"The key is not to make it a different product, but how do you make it simpler?" said John Marick, CEO of Consumer Cellular, who shared a stage Tuesday with Telikin [Chief Executive](#) Fred Allegrezza at CES's "Silvers Summit." Marick's Oregon company, which offers service via AT&T's network, draws high ratings for its no-contracts, no-hassles plans.

But everyone can benefit from a push for simplicity, especially as devices get more powerful and the number of applications swells.

About 3 out of 4 people don't even know how to activate their smartphone's Wi-Fi connection when a network is available, Sprint's Fared Adib told an overflow crowd at CNet's "Next Big Thing" session.

"There's so much technology in these phones, people don't know how to use it," Adib said.

Sheryl Connelly, a futurist employed by Ford Motor Co., responded that developers need to guard against "feature fatigue."

"If they don't make my life easier - if they're not intuitive, if they're not accessible - then I feel duped," Connelly said.

There are signs the message is getting through on many fronts, from simplified controls on proliferating "smart TVs" - sets connected to the Internet that can readily access content from services such as Netflix and YouTube - to a host of devices that boast easier user interfaces.

More important, it matters to at least some who control the purse strings.

Michael Yang, managing director in the Silicon Valley office of Comcast Ventures, a venture-capital affiliate of the Philadelphia company, said convenience is among the principles he stresses when evaluating technologies aimed at the crowded health-and-fitness market.

"It better be brain-dead easy, or you're going to lose the consumer," Yang told a "Digital Health Summit" audience.

Even we who aren't quite there yet thank him.

FOCUS ON PRICE: The mobile computers we call smartphones and tablets are a tremendous innovation. They also suck up vast amounts of money not everybody can afford.

What's the answer? Some better deals are offered away from the major carriers. But one of the more intriguing innovations comes from Republic Wireless, a subsidiary of North Carolina's Bandwidth.com, a broadband and phone provider.

Customers pay for a \$249 Motorola Android smartphone, plus a \$10 startup fee. Then it's just \$19 a month - less than \$22 with taxes and fees - for unlimited talking, texting and data.

The trick is that Republic uses "hybrid calling," which routes calls over Wi-Fi whenever it's available. When it's not, the service uses Sprint's network. The phone comes with Android's Gingerbread software - not the latest and greatest, but enough to do plenty of amazing smartphone stuff.

FOCUS ON SAFETY AND HEALTH: This trend is most obvious in the mushrooming number of companies pitching monitoring devices, some stand-alone and many that make use of smartphones' built-in sensors, to track your vital data or even your baby's.

But here's my personal favorite: AfterShokz headphones, which bypass your outer ear and conduct sounds to your inner ear and brain via your cheekbones. A military version reportedly helped the Navy Seals during the Osama bin Laden raid.

New this year, to complement last year's award-winning version, is a Bluetooth version. Like the original, AfterShokz Bluez wraps around the back of your head and loops over your ears, leaving them open to other sounds - like that of the car that's about to hit you when you're chilling

on music.

[CEO](#) Bruce Borenstein said that Britain has blamed "iPod oblivion" for as many as 17 accidents a day, and that several U.S. states are considering headphone restrictions.

Thankfully, what technology causes it can also sometimes correct.

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