

Nest hopes to reinvent smoke alarms as it did the thermostat

October 9 2013, by Chris O'brien



When a group of former Apple Inc. employees announced that they had created a company called Nest to reinvent the thermostat, Silicon Valley did a double take.

You left Apple to work on a ... [thermostat](#)?

But after the group founded Nest and released its first thermostat in 2011, the funny looks stopped. In the past two years, the Palo Alto, Calif., company has become one of Silicon Valley's hottest startups thanks to its well-designed, Internet-connected thermostat, which learns the behaviors of its owners to become more energy-efficient.

Having reinvented the thermostat, Nest has tackled its next engineering and design challenge. This week, the company announced the availability of its first connected smoke [alarm](#), called Nest Protect.

The device monitors for both smoke and [carbon monoxide](#). And it comes packed with an array of sensors and radio devices that the company hopes will not just keep people safer but also make them love the new gadget.

"We love to take things that are essential but boring and create a real emotional connection between the user and the device," said Matt Rogers, a Nest co-founder and vice president of engineering who was previously responsible for developing the software for Apple's iPod.

In that case, you can't get much duller than the [smoke alarm](#). Which, according to Nest, is not just a problem but a genuine safety hazard.

Although smoke and carbon monoxide alarms are supposed to keep people safe, most people see them as annoyances. They go off when people are cooking, they can be hard to turn off, and when the battery runs low, they inevitably start chirping at 3 a.m.

The result: People take the batteries out and forget put them back in, leading to preventable fire deaths.

Nest doesn't just want you to just stop hating your smoke alarm. The company wants you to love it.

Nest Protect includes features such as a pre-alert, in which a female voice comes through a speaker (think Siri) and says, "Heads up: There's smoke in the bedroom." The voice activates at a lower level of smoke than would trigger the full-on alarm.

If the smoke is just from cooking, for instance, a motion sensor lets you just wave your hand at the device to prevent the alarm from sounding. No need to climb a ladder and repeatedly press a reset button.

The device also acts as a motion-activated night light. If you pass nearby, a soft light will turn on.

Like the thermostat, Nest Protect can also be monitored via Nest's smartphone application. The alarm will send out alerts several months in advance about the battery status, for instance. And when the alarm sounds, the notification will also be sent to the phone, along with instructions on what to do in case of fire and a 911 button that appears on the screen to make a quick emergency call.

In homes that have multiple Nest Protects or thermostats, the devices will also talk with one another and share information about things like whether someone is currently in the room to adjust heat settings accordingly. And if one Nest Protect begins sounding a warning or alarm, the other devices will also echo that warning.

The company is still awaiting final regulatory approval for Nest Protect, which costs \$129. But it hopes to begin selling the device in early November.

In the meantime, the announcement signals that Nest is expanding its horizons rapidly. The company raised \$80 million in venture capital this year, giving it a valuation of \$800 million amid reports that it was shipping more than 40,000 thermostats every month.

Rogers said Nest has grown from 90 employees two years ago to 300 employees.

Nest Protect is just the company's second product, but Rogers said the pace of product introductions is going to accelerate. And in the process, Nest's image is bound to shift beyond being known for just its thermostat.

Although Rogers was uncomfortable with the term "smart home," he made it clear that Nest thought there were lots of things in the house that could be more exciting and useful by connecting them to the Internet and to one another to create an experience that makes people passionate about these overlooked gadgets.

"Over the next 12 months, we'll introduce other great products in other industries," he said. "We are a very aggressive and hungry company. And we love reinventing the unloved."

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