

# Review: Amazon Echo is great and will only get better

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I've been playing with one of Amazon's newest gadgets, the Echo, which is part Bluetooth speaker and part Siri. I believe we're all going to have something like this in our homes in the future.

If you remember back to the original "Star Trek," the crew of the Enterprise could simply speak to the computer and it would answer.

The Echo (\$179.99, [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)) brings that experience to your house.

Picture a computer that's always listening for your commands.

You control the Echo by saying its name, "Alexa."

You might say, "Alexa, what's the temperature?" or "Alexa, did the Texas Rangers win last night?"

Sure, you can do that with Siri now on your iPhone or Google Now on iOS or Android, but Echo wants to help you do more.

It has seven microphones spaced around its top, which give Echo an unbelievable range for hearing commands.

At work, I was able to speak to Echo from more than 50 feet away in a conversational tone.

At home, I kept the Echo in the living room, and I could stand two rooms away at our kitchen sink and give commands.

In the interest of staying happily married, I'll say only that Alexa is a very good listener, and she has slightly better hearing than my wife.

Echo is set up and configured with the help of a companion app on your smartphone.

The app is used to configure Echo to join your Wi-Fi network.

What can Echo do?

Echo can answer reference questions like "How many teaspoons are in a tablespoon?" or "How far is it to El Paso?"

You can also ask about people: "Who is the mayor of Dallas?" "How old is Paul McCartney?" "How tall is Dirk Nowitzki?"

Echo can help you keep up to date with current events. You can have Alexa read the news, weather and sports, which you can customize from sources like NPR, the BBC and ESPN.

Finding a podcast by name is as easy as asking, "Alexa, play MacBreak Weekly."

You can link the Echo to your Google calendar and ask about the day's appointments, although you can't create calendar events.

You can play music from several sources,

including the library of music included in your Amazon Prime subscription and any music you've uploaded to the Amazon cloud.

"Alexa, play Johnny Cash from Prime Streaming."

You can link your Pandora account and play streaming radio stations from TuneIn and iHeartRadio.

You can say, "Alexa, play my James Taylor Pandora station," or "Alexa, play KERA," and the stream begins.

If you subscribe to Audible, Echo can read your audio books to you.

The top of the Echo is a volume dial, but you can also speak to control the volume: "Alexa, set volume to 4." You can also use your [voice](#) to control the music: "Alexa, stop," or "Alexa, next song."

There are some utility commands - you can ask Alexa to set a timer or wake you with an alarm.

You can enter your home and work addresses in the app and then ask Alexa how long it will take to get to the office.

## KEEPING LISTS

One of the better uses I found is letting the Echo keep up with your shopping list.

You can say, "Alexa, add sun-dried tomatoes to my shopping list," and the entry appears on the shopping list in the Echo app on your phone.

The time it takes for shopping list items to appear in the app after you say them is astoundingly fast.

Of course, this is an Amazon product, so you can also make some online purchases. Your choices are limited, though: You can buy songs you hear or reorder things you've previously purchased.

Amazon is steadily adding new features. It just added voice control for Philips Hue bulbs and Belkin WeMo [home automation](#) switches.

I can see the Echo being a great way to control complex home automations.

## CONCLUSIONS

I really like the Echo, but I'm not sure how much I'd use it day to day.

I use a Sonos system for music in my house, but if Amazon developed a way to sync music playback with multiple Echos, I could see them giving Sonos a run for my business.

Amazon has announced a [software development kit](#) and is offering funding for app development.

I love it when a gadget just works as advertised. The Echo is very cool and works well, but Alexa is nowhere near perfect.

There will be a lot of times Echo will tell you she doesn't know the answer to your question, like when I tried "Alexa, when is the next full moon?" or "Alexa, how many Mondays are there in September of 2015?"

I did like checking the weather or asking Alexa to read the news, but I think Amazon is just teasing us with Echo's functionality so far.

I think when developers begin creating apps and integrations for Alexa, you'll see its usefulness explode.

Pros: Microphones have outstanding range. Good sound. Home automation integration.

Cons: A little expensive. Can't answer some simple questions.

Bottom line: This type of gadget will be in all our homes one day. Amazon is off to a great start with the Echo.

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