

Impact Products for the Digital Home

A ROUND UP OF NEW GADGETS THAT CAN REVOLUTIONIZE CUSTOM INSTALLATIONS

The Consumer Electronics Show is an exhilarating, exhausting, and overwhelming experience that every professional in the electronics field should attend at least once in their lives. It's an amazing display of the world's breadth and depth of technological wonders.

One of the greatest challenges at CES is to recognize the small percentage of products that will truly have a near-term impact on our lives. From my custom installation perspective (with a focus on network and Internet-connected, IP technologies) I have listed and briefly reviewed the products that I believe will have the greatest impact on our client's homes in the months and years ahead.

MICROSOFT HOME SERVER

Microsoft is increasingly serious about the residential hardware and software market. Bill Gates announced in his keynote that the company will introduce a home server software package later this year branded as HP's MediaSmart Server, which will automatically backup multiple home PCs and allow remote access to files and applications via a DDNS (dynamic DNS service) that HP will provide. This means that you will easily and securely be able to access your home's files from anywhere in the world with an Internet-connected device. In addition, the Windows Media Connect feature will allow the home server to stream TV shows, movies, photos, and music to PCs and XBOX 360s on the home network (not remotely, however, at this time).

These software moves by Microsoft are taking us in the direction of the client/server model found in the enterprise world—a direct result of the increasing amount of data (photos, music, files, etc.) that we need to easily locate and retrieve from multiple computers throughout the home. Having all the data reside on a central server makes a lot of sense and having automatic backups of each hard drive in the home to a central server makes even more sense. Admittedly, network attached storage file servers, coupled with back-up and remote access software can do much of what this new home server will do, but now you have one software package that does all the work seamlessly, and adding multimedia streaming



Microsoft head, Bill Gates, unveiled the HP MediaSmart Server at this year's CES.

enhances Microsoft's Home Server offering to an even greater extent.

MICROSOFT SIDESHOW

Microsoft SideShow is a new feature in the Vista operating system that uses gadgets, or add-in programs, to extend information from a computer to small-screen devices. These small-screen devices can show information from your Vista computer whether the computer is actually on or off. Imagine that you can pick up your AV remote control and read the TV's electronic program guide without affecting the operation of the Vista Media Center computer that you may be watching. With a SideShow-enabled remote control you can find out what programs will be showing next or program a future recording without turning on the Media Center. You can even browse through and play your music collection without having to turn on an interface with the Media Center screen. Al-

ready half a dozen remote control manufacturers have announced support for Windows SideShow this year and I expect to see many more universal remote products incorporating this very useful software tool by the end of the year.

RUSSOUND SMART MEDIA CONSOLE

Russound, a company whose reputation for manufacturing reliable and robust whole-house audio products for the custom installation professional, announced that it will be shipping a media console product with Vista by the middle of this year. The company has partnered with Exceptional Innovation and its Lifeware software product to allow use of the Vista Media Center interface to control and distribute music on Russound's whole-house equipment, like the user-friendly in-wall Uno keypads or via the Vista onscreen media center interface. Coupled with the SideShow universal remote control interfaces, the Smart Media Console offers a full range

of options for controlling whole-house music: in-wall keypads, onscreen graphical interface control, and universal remote control. This level of whole-house music control will represent one of the most flexible and comprehensive levels of audio control ever offered in the home.

NETGEAR IP PHONE

Netgear demonstrated its mobile IP phones, the dual-mode, cordless Skype phone and the smaller, Skype WiFi phone. The larger, two-line phone, serves as a Skype IP phone or simply as a wireless extension of your existing landline service. The smaller mobile phone utilizes the wireless 802.11b or g cloud in your home for placing and receiving all calls. All of these models should be available now and will cost between \$200 and \$300.

APPLE IPHONE

While the Apple iPhone was introduced at MacWorld in San Francisco (and not at CES) I have briefly included it in this review because there is an aspect of the iPhone that could have a profound effect on our custom installations. Specifically, the Internet browsing capabilities the iPhone could finally make remote home control phone browsers much more functional. Products from Control4, iControl, HomeLogic, and many others allow for browser-based remote home control access of lights, thermostats, and hot tubs from existing WAP-enabled phones, but the current phone screens are too small and primitive to be easily navigated. I believe that the larger, high-resolution screen of the iPhone coupled with Apple's robust Safari web-browsing software will dramatically improve the remote home control user experience and spur increased demand for all of these home automation products.

Not everything that interested me at the show had a home networking angle. A couple of additional products that caught my eye included Vantage's Evo line of on-wall mounting products. With a modular system that attaches to the face of a wall you can now easily and elegantly add a plasma screen and surround sound system to almost any room. These installations would typically require a lot of onsite drilling and cutting to install plasma mounts, wires and speakers but the Evo AV wall lets you install each of these items on any empty wall with only the need for an electrical outlet and a cable or satellite video port. Now you can install a complete, pre-assembled custom integrated home theater experience in just a matter of a few hours.

Another product that intrigued me was devel-

oped by a small company in Israel called Wallelex. It has leveraged its smart credit card technology to develop the world's first 2-Gb USB card with the profile of a credit card. I know that USB thumb drives have been available for sometime but it was never something I intuitively took with me. I always have my wallet and now it has just one more "credit card", only this one contains 2GBs of data, music, and photos. These cards sell for about \$80 and can be found at www.wallelex.com.

CES once again lived up to its reputation as the

world's greatest electronics show—once you get over the fact that the lines are always too long and the food in the convention hall is too expensive you realize that there is no more exciting place to be for seeing, touching, and experiencing the latest consumer electronics products. This year should be another great one for the consumers of electronic equipment and the

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A Star Is Born

Now mounting a projector is as easy as 1, 2, 3. Featuring new MagnaGuide™ technology and Lock-It™ Security Hardware, Polariss ensures perfect alignment with powerful magnets that lock into place for easy, one person mounting of most projectors up to 10 lbs. Best of all, Polariss is from Premier Mounts so you can rely on top quality with great service to match. For more information about Polariss and all the other Premier Mount stars, call 800.368.9700 or visit us at www.mounts.com.



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