

THE POWER OF

VOICE

**Hey Siri, turn off the lights!
Alexa, lock the door!
OK Google, turn on the TV!
Voice-controlled devices
are making life's little tasks
only a comment away**

By Sharon Jayson

It's only been a few years since the names Siri and Alexa appeared on our cultural landscape, but if you haven't escaped the advertising for the two digital personal assistants from Apple and Amazon, you likely are curious about what they can do.

Now there's another big player in the voice-activated device field: "OK Google" is the command used to activate Google Home, just like saying "Alexa" to activate the Amazon Echo or "Hey Siri" to talk to your iPhone, iPad or Apple Watch. The trio of companies — Apple, Amazon and Google — is vying for attention and illustrating why voice control is the next big thing in home automation.



Voice control is "the biggest story in the industry" because of the convenience, said Dave Pedigo, vice president of emerging technologies for CEDIA, an Indianapolis-based international trade association for the connected home.

Devices that use voice commands allow consumers to control actions by saying commands aloud rather than touching a smartphone screen to activate an app or using a physical button or

switch to make something happen in the home. Voice command can be as simple as checking on the weather or adding items to your to-do list, or as sophisticated as controlling lighting or window shades, or adjusting the thermostat. Pedigo estimates that by year's end, as many as 15 percent of homes across the country could have some kind of voice-control feature.

"Right now, a lot of it is the 'cool factor,' but not for long," Pedigo said. "At some point relatively quickly, people will realize how nice and convenient it is. The reason why it's so popular is because it actually works pretty darn well."

Voice control requires a few must-haves, Pedigo said: A home must be Wi-Fi enabled and each product to be controlled through voice has to be a smart product compatible with that

home's voice service, as in "Works with Alexa" or "Works with Google Home."

For more specific commands, a homeowner would have to do some extra setup, such as creating what's termed "a scene" that encompasses a series of actions, he says. Creating a "goodbye scene" to leave each day, for example, would turn off all the lights and adjust the thermostat in several rooms, while a command to "watch a movie" could turn on the TV and dim the lights.

For a preview of what consumers can expect this year, we explored CEDIA's international trade show in Dallas last fall, where almost 19,000 attendees roamed the convention, gazing at products exhibited by more than 500 global companies.

Several sessions focused on voice control,

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— DAVE PEDIGO,
of CEDIA, a trade association for the connected home

Voice-controlled home automation is the hottest thing in consumer technology. Voice commands allow users to control a growing list of smart devices, from smart light bulbs that instantly change the mood in a room, to smart thermostats, security cameras, lights, stereos, alarm clocks and more.

with experts such as Charlie Kindel, of Amazon, explaining the idea behind the voice.

"The idea was to create a computer in the cloud that will take care of customers' everyday things — whether it's their shopping lists, playing music, keeping track of schedules, ordering pizza, keeping control of their devices that are around them," he said. Alexa "is that computer in the cloud that powers all these experiences."

Although voice has a lot of promise, it's not perfect for every situation, said Alex Capecelatro, CEO of Josh.ai, a standalone artificial intelligence platform named Josh, which uses voice control for wireless connected home devices.

"Voice is not the only solution that I think is going to replace everything," he said. "Our guiding principle is what is simplest for the end user

— what's going to make their life really natural and really easy."

Dan Quigley, also of Amazon, said this technology will evolve, but for now "We're at Day One with voice."

Each of these companies has its own set of compatible smart products, although some work with other companies' products. Apple's Home app communicates through Siri from any iPhone, iPad or Apple Watch to connected devices that control its HomeKit products. Only products certified as "Works With Apple HomeKit" can be used to activate garage door openers, lighting systems, thermostats, door locks, air conditioning/heating and window shades, to name a few.

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MONTHLY MEETING

Bluebonnet's Board of Directors will meet at 9 a.m. Jan. 24, at Bluebonnet's Headquarters, 155 Electric Ave. (formerly 650 Texas Hwy. 21 East), Bastrop. Find the agenda and last-minute updates Jan. 20 at bluebonnet.coop. Hover your cursor over 'next board meeting' on our home page.

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet's offices will be closed Jan. 2 for the New Year's holiday, Jan. 16 for Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Jan. 19 for a company meeting.

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OUTAGES

Call **800-949-4414** if you have a power outage. Keep up with outages 24/7 at bluebonnet.coop. Hover your cursor over 'outage report' on our home page. You can also send us a text message. To get started, text **BBOUTAGE** to **85700** and follow the prompts. Save that number in your contacts, perhaps as "Bluebonnet Outages." If your power goes out, text **OUT** to that number. Download our free mobile app for iPhone or Android and you can report an outage on your smartphone.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative produced the blue-bordered pages 18-25 in this issue of the magazine with content that is of specific interest or relevance to Bluebonnet members. The rest of the magazine's content is distributed statewide to any member of an electric cooperative in Texas. For information about the magazine, contact Lisa Ogle at **512-332-7968** or email lisa.ogle@bluebonnet.coop.

Correction: An article about the sources of Bluebonnet area towns' names in the December issue of Texas Co-op Power magazine contained an error on Page 22. The Texas Revolution ended in 1836.

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Amazon's voice control of Alexa can do the same but with products that are compatible. For example, Vivint home security products are compatible with Alexa. Google Home works with a variety of smart products offered by such brands as Philips, Samsung and Nest, which Google owns. Amazon Alexa also works with Nest products.

If all this sounds overwhelming, enter the "home technologist," a new name for the point person to help consumers integrate their home technology so that products can work together with compatible wireless systems.

"They need somebody to help them through this and to have full understanding of it," said Suzie Wiliford, of the National Kitchen and Bath Association. "They need a technologist."

Smart features aren't without risk. Security continues to be a concern, as last fall's hacking of some smart home gadgets illustrates. With more consumers adopting internet-connected devices in their homes, some products have higher security standards than others. Security experts warn consumers to make sure the products they buy have built-in precautions to reduce the chances of being hacked.

"We are going to have to start seeing stronger security in home networking," said Pedigo, of the trade association. "The culprit is the general lack of security awareness nationwide — from the consumers to the manufacturers."

More than 60 percent of individuals have some concern about someone accessing their devices without permission, and the owners of smart products have even more concern, according to Dallas-based market research and consulting company Parks Associates, which was among the presenters at CEDIA.

"Once you own a product, you get a sense for the potential risk," said Tom Kerber, of Parks. "The door locks risk (for being breached) is much more obvious. A thermostat is not. It depends on the type of systems and products."

Kerber said each product working independently with different apps is one approach, particularly for the do-it-yourself market, while products that work as a system with a central controller often require a service provider. However, he noted that the Open Connectivity Foundation, an industry group dedicated to developing standards and certification for devices, is working to make devices compatible with one another, and to bypass the need for a service provider.

New data suggests about 15 percent of all households have some type of smart product. Most of these categories have a combined growth rate of nearly 20 percent, Kerber said.

"The key here is to just make it simple for the consumer," said John Ouseph, of GE Consumer & Industrial, "to make purposeful 'smarts.' It has to make it smarter for the consumer to use and simpler for the consumer to use." ■

Home survey: The trends in building smarter houses

CEDIA, an international trade association for the connected home, and home remodeling and design site Houzz.com surveyed almost 1,000 homeowners who are planning or recently completed a home renovation project. Among the findings of the 2016 Houzz Smart Home Trends Survey presented at the CEDIA convention:

55%

Percentage of homeowners who renovated but opted against adding smart technologies during their projects. Those who said they considered the technologies but didn't go through with it cited a lack of interest, cost concerns or privacy concerns.

67% 25%

Homeowners buy smart technology for various reasons. The majority — 67 percent — want better security, safety and protection of their homes against intruders, 52 percent cite monitoring and controlling the safety of their home when they are away and 30 percent cite the ability to monitor any activities within their home.

45%

Percentage of those renovating homes who are incorporating smart systems or devices that can be monitored or controlled through a smartphone, tablet or computer; 26 percent are including voice-controlled features.

75%

Spending on smart systems and devices differs depending on the type of technology. Three-quarters of those upgrading for smart home security and safety spend \$1,500 or less on those features, while only 5 percent invest more than \$5,000.



With Apple HomeKit, try the August Smart Lock HomeKit Enabled, \$229

Use your Apple or Android mobile device and tell Siri to lock and unlock your door. Mounted on the inside of your door (you keep your door's exterior hardware), this locks and unlocks your door, creates a virtual key for guests and keeps track of who has had access to that door. It automatically locks behind you and unlocks as you approach (with your smartphone). You can also turn it on or off when you want. The manufacturer promises easy installation. www.august.com — click on August Smart Lock tab.



Siri's voice commands for Apple devices, such as the smartphone at top, can be used to control a variety of products including the August Smart Lock, above.



Phillips Hue Ambience bulbs let the user change the look and feel of a room with voice commands. The bulbs work with a variety of voice-command devices.

With Amazon Echo, Apple HomeKit or Google Home, try the Phillips Hue Ambience light starter kit, \$200

Bathe any room with shifting levels of white ambient light or a multitude of colors (up to 16 million, they say) to match your mood, music or movies. The Hue's small operating device, called a "bridge," connects via Wi-Fi and can be controlled with a smartphone app or the voice-controlled devices. The new models have deeper colors. Also works with Logitech Harmony, Nest and Samsung SmartThings. www.meethue.com.

READY TO START TALKING? PAIR UP WITH SOME SMART DEVICES



The Amazon Tap, above left, is an Alexa voice-enabled portable Bluetooth speaker. The Echo, center, is the main hub for controlling Alexa-compatible devices. The Dot, above right, accesses Alexa around the house but individual Dots are needed for each room. WeMo Light Switch, right, is compatible with Alexa and other voice-control systems.

With Amazon Echo, try the WeMo Light Switch, \$50

This Wi-Fi enabled light switch lets you turn lights on and off, no matter your location. Controlled remotely with an Android smartphone or tablet, iPhone, iPad or iPod touch, or by talking to Amazon's Alexa. Smartphone or tablet must have a 3G or 4G LTE internet connection. www.belkin.com — click on Products.



With Google Home, try the Nest Cam Outdoor, \$200

Rain or shine, 24/7, this slick small outdoor camera can detect activity. You can check out the scene on your smartphone via the Nest app. It plugs into power, so no batteries to worry about. Video is recorded and lives in the cloud; you can speak to a visitor or intruder via the camera and your phone. There's a simple indoor camera too, also \$200. Website video makes installation look simple. www.nest.com — click on Products.



Google Home's voice-connected smart home system comes in an array of colors, above, and works with the Nest Cam Outdoor, left, which lets a user see and talk to visitors remotely.