

CES Report: Home Entertainment Technology Matures

By Kerry Blessing



Every January, my partner Willy and I (along with about 139,999 other people) make our annual pilgrimage to Las Vegas for the Consumer Electronics Show. A city of excess, it's the perfect place to showcase the new, often extreme technologies the industry has to offer. Some years there are more innovations than you can shake a remote at, but this year's show was more about refinement than breakthrough. Walking through the 2,500 exhibits (and my feet feel like I visited them all) I saw, time and time again, new, more mature incarnations of technologies that had made splashy debuts at previous shows.

This is a good thing. Although it's fun to drool over the latest whiz-bang gadgetry, it's the rare client with a sufficiently adventurous nature (or deep pocket) to be the early adopter of such things. It's only later, when new technologies have been refined, their bugs exorcised and their prices coaxed down from the stratosphere, that we can make confident recommendations to our clients in good conscience, actually knowing what we're talking about.

Plasma screens, those large-format, flat-panel television monitors, have been the belle of the ball the last few years at CES. This year I saw screens that were not just bigger, but much, much better, with a vastly improved picture quality. I wouldn't have believed this was possible. Then I walked into the Fujitsu suite.

They were demonstrating their newest Plasmavision, a whopping 80-inch screen with the most breathtaking picture I have ever seen. In my experience, plasmas can look washed out, especially in bright light. This one was set up in the Presidential Suite at the Venetian, with the curtains open and room lights blazing. The demo I saw showed a woman applying makeup in her bathroom

mirror and the picture was so bright, so vivid and so perfect that the experience felt voyeuristic. Fujitsu has been an acknowledged leader in plasma technology. Now, with the introduction of the new AVMI digital processor, used in their latest 40-Series screens at 42-inches to 63-inches, that leadership has been reasserted in living color. The AVMI is also used in the new 80-inch model to stunning effect.

Another advantage of the maturity of plasma technology: prices are coming down. Fujitsu's 55-inch plasma used to retail for \$15,000; it's now \$10,000. Still a significant chunk of change, but a 33 percent drop in price from last year.

Digital audio storage devices are another relatively new technology that's coming into its own. This is a technology I can get really excited about, because it has the potential to change the way people listen to music in their homes. The user loads music CDs onto the server — a one-time operation. Music is then accessed and played digitally from the server, not the discs. The advantages are many. Tracks can be sorted according to a number of criteria (song title, artist, style), track-switching time is virtually nonexistent, and it's easy to create custom playlists. (I myself have playlists titled, "Cooking for Friends," "Hanging by the Pool" and "Rough Day at the Office.") Also, no more storing or searching through CDs — they can go live somewhere else. Many music servers can even display the cover art on the control panel.

Meda Systems makes the hands-down winner here. Their Bravo music server offers by far the greatest versatility and most storage capacity for the money, and is without a doubt the easiest to set up and use. It offers four zones, which means it's possible for dad to listen to Coltrane in the garage, while mom's got Celine Dion on in the den and the

kids crank up Nine Inch Nails and Radiohead in their rooms. The Bravo comes with a 250-gigabyte hard drive, sufficient storage capacity for thousands of songs. Something to look out for here: Expansion servers for the Bravo are relatively inexpensive, but some manufacturers require the addition of an entire second unit to expand capacity, so be sure you know your client's intentions toward future upgrades before you spec a particular unit.

It's taken just a few short years for TiVo to go from esoteric new technology to household word — as in "I'm going to TiVo the game." At this year's show, DirecTV premiered a new four-zone HD satellite receiver/TiVo unit with three tuners, allowing four different zones to access material from any of three satellite sources or the hard drive at the same time.

On the music front, I was simply blown away by Krell's new Evolution Series amplifiers and preamps. There is the Evolution dual-mono preamp: Two monaural preamps used on two discreetly separate channels. They don't share a power supply or any common signal-carrying circuitry. Housing the circuitry separate from the power supply and the right channel separate from the left, virtually eliminates the swapping of stray electromagnetic energy that distorts and muddies the signal. This is simply the ultimate expression of audio art by the preeminent audio manufacturer in America. Why should you care? Because a client wants a music room and asks you to spec the best, you need to know what that is. If you don't understand this stuff, you become the limiting factor in a project's success. If you do, you not only increase the value of the project, you increase your value in the eyes of your client. ■