

GUEST EDITORIAL

by Shelly Palmer, CEO, The Palmer Group



The superstar of CES 2017 was not a car, or a robot, or even a TV; it was Alexa Voice Service (AVS), the software that allows you to control compatible devices with your voice. Various reports estimated there were 700–1,100 Alexa-controllable products at the show. I can't verify the number, but “and it works with Alexa” was the running gag at CES. The familiar Amazon/Alexa logo seemed to be everywhere.

Why Alexa Is “The” Killer App

The 1960s vision of living in George and Jane Jetson's house has not been realized at scale. While it is possible to build a smart home where everything from the window shades to the television to the HVAC are self-aware and work in a perfectly balanced AI-controlled, automated way, in practice, it's just too hard to accomplish. Devices really don't talk to other devices, at least not in meaningful ways. This is especially true if you try to mix devices from different manufacturers. The IoT industry has been waiting for a killer app, an app like Apple Homekit or Google Home, but neither of those has delivered on the promise of a “grand unified smart home universe.”

Enter Alexa ... the Killer App for IoT. If we learned anything at CES this year, we learned that

Alexa, The Killer App

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anything that can be connected to Alexa will be connected to Alexa. Which truly changes everything!

Creating interoperable technology is not an evolutionarily stable strategy for most IoT manufacturers. The margin is in the ecosystem, not in any particular piece of hardware. However, by adding AVS functionality to a device, the device instantly becomes pseudo-interoperable. Voice control is the killer, unifying app for IoT, and at the moment, Alexa is the biggest name in voice control.

What Makes a Device Alexa Compatible?

Smart devices are controllable (mostly with apps). If there is an app to control your smart device, it is most likely quite easy to build a “skill” for it. Skills are apps that allow AVS to take the place of the manufacturer’s app and directly control the smart device. So you could say, “Alexa, tell Crestron I’d like to read in the bedroom” (for your Crestron) or “Alexa, set downstairs thermostat to 70 degrees” (for your Iris Smart Home System), and even though Crestron and Iris have nothing to do with one another, you can control them both with your voice.

Anything That Can Be Connected Will Be Connected



Amazon is also making AVS available to other manufacturers, so Alexa will soon be built into many other systems and devices. Smartphones, cars, appliances, pretty much anything with a microphone and a speaker can be AVS enabled.

There Is Room for Improvement

It's early days. Alexa is awesome for controlling independent things. Things that would not, in other circumstances, talk to one another. But your thermostat has no idea what other smart devices are in the house and neither does Alexa. Is the smoke alarm or CO2 sensor or motion sensor or security camera or water leak detection alarm activated? Alexia (a plurality of Alexas) have no way of knowing. At the moment, its control is limited to on/off commands and a few simple, one-way instructions.

There is a huge opportunity for Amazon to add an intelligence layer to AVS or to let other companies create them. When a little Machine Learning or other type of intelligence is added into these self-assembling Alexa-compatible ecosystems, we're going to live in a Star Trek universe, not George Jetson's.

And then...

Google Home, an Echo competitor, works with a completely different set of protocols and has different wake words. Alexa has a head start, but Google is very likely to catch up quickly.

An Echo in the living room and Google Home in the kitchen and hijinks ensues! Will you need to learn to speak Alexa and speak Google and speak Siri and speak Cortana (even if you don't work for Microsoft)? There will be room for a meta-service (or a translator) here somewhere.

Just How Dangerous Is Alexa?

The "Amazon Echo is a hands-free speaker you control with your voice. It connects to the Alexa Voice Service to play music, provide information, news, sports scores, weather, and more." If you're wondering how Alexa works and just how dangerous it is, I explored that last week in "Just How Dangerous Is Alexa?"

What's Next?

Uses for AVS and Alexa are limited only by our imaginations. It's easy to see the value of voice control in so many ordinary situations. That said, there are social, moral and ethical considerations that will have to be addressed. If you teach a 5-year-old to speak to Alexa, will you have to reverse English syntax to engender civility? Alexa is the wake word. So you can't say, "Thank you, Alexa" when Alexa performs a task; you have to say, "Alexa" (to wake it back up), "thank you." It's English, but not really how you want to teach a child to respond. "Here's a candy bar." "Dad, thank you." It looks OK in print, so go ahead and say it out loud: "Reader, thank you."

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About Shelly Palmer

Named one of LinkedIn Top 10 Voices in Technology, Shelly Palmer is President & CEO of The Palmer Group, a strategic advisory and business development practice focused at the nexus of technology, media and marketing with a special emphasis on data science and data-driven decision making. He is Fox 5 New York's on-air tech and digital media expert and a regular commentator on CNBC and CNN. Shelly Palmer also presented the Opening Keynote for CEDIA 2016, America's leading event for residential installers.

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