

CES 2020: Companies Step Up to Combat Tech Angst

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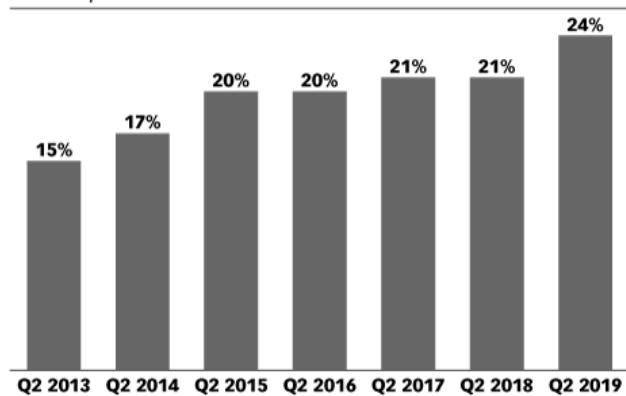
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Earlier this month, more than 175,000 tech enthusiasts gathered at CES 2020 in Las Vegas for a preview of the world's most exciting new products. As usual, the exhibit space was chock-full of futuristic, eye-popping innovations, including flying Hyundai Ubers, bionic robot sharks, smart pajamas and zero-gravity bathtubs. But beneath the shiny veneers and seemingly endless hype, tech companies are working quietly to address a growing problem: As AI, the internet of things (IoT) and next-generation connectivity relentlessly creep into everyday life, "tech angst" is at an all-time high.

A Q2 2019 GlobalWebIndex survey found that nearly one in four internet users worldwide (24%) don't understand new technology and fear being left behind, up from just 15% in Q2 2013.

Internet Users Worldwide Who Say They Do Not Understand Computers and New Technology, Q2 2013-Q2 2019

% of respondents



Source: GlobalWebIndex, "Connecting the Dots: Consumer Trends that Will Shape 2020," Nov 12, 2019

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Consumers are also more anxious than ever about technology's ability to compromise their personal privacy. At the current pace of development, it will soon be difficult to watch TV, drive a car, open a refrigerator or even go to sleep without sensors collecting data about these experiences. For this reason, it's more important than ever that the industry find ways to help people comfortably use technology in simpler, more intuitively "human" ways and understand how it can ultimately benefit them.

If CES 2019 was all about how technology can make people's lives easier, CES 2020 was about making the innovations themselves easier to use and less tech-like. This trend manifested itself in several ways.

Voice Control Reduces Friction

First, the acceleration in market uptake of voice assistants is helping people interact with technology more naturally and with less friction, eliminating the need for keyboards, multiple apps, remote controls or screen overload. Amazon and Google designed their CES exhibits around voice assistants (Alexa and Google Assistant, respectively) and touted multilingual voice integration into nearly every gadget imaginable—from TVs to eyeglasses and jewelry to vehicles.

Google's efforts to make voice technology more transparent and easier to use included the introduction of new features for Google Assistant,

such as speed dial, scheduled actions and commands intended to make it more secure and private. For example, it now gives users the option to say, “Hey Google, delete everything I said to you today” or “Hey Google, that wasn't for you.”

Amazon is driving especially hard into the automotive industry, embedding Alexa directly into car dashboards to integrate with various connected-car systems. It hopes this will eventually eliminate the need for drivers to use multiple voice assistants and/or tethered smartphones and reduce distracted driving. At CES, Amazon announced new partnerships with Lamborghini and electric vehicle startup Rivian, adding to its already lengthy list of agreements with automakers.

Some devices at the show were designed to combine voice with gestures for added functionality and easier use. For example, the U by Moen Smart Faucet can stop and start the flow of water, heat it to a specific temperature and dispense a measured quantity without ever touching the handle. Similarly, TVs from top manufacturers now include gesture controls and incorporate far-field microphone technology that lets users activate their TV's built-in voice assistant without getting off the couch.

Tech Gets a Human Face

Companies are also attempting to make the tech itself more relatable. The Samsung-funded lab Neon is giving AI tech a more human face—literally. The company unveiled the eponymous Neon, a humanoid chatbot it describes as “a computationally created virtual being that looks and behaves like a real human, with the ability to show emotions and intelligence,” and “lifelike reality that is beyond our normal perception to distinguish.” While Neon is not ready for primetime, the company hopes it will someday satisfy consumers who reject traditional chatbots and demand human (or at least human-looking and -sounding) assistance.

This push to humanize tech is also taking hold in pet technology, where manufacturers are foregoing robotic-looking dogs and cats in favor of emotional support animals that look and act like living, breathing

critters. For example, robotics startup Tombot showed off Jennie, an animatronic yellow lab with synthetic fur that responds to touch, nuzzles, barks, whines and snores. While Jennie was originally designed for people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia, her manufacturer hopes she will have wider consumer appeal.

Gadgets Blend with Decor

In perhaps the most extreme effort to stem tech fatigue, some manufacturers are seeking to completely eliminate the sight of tech or make it fade into the background when it's not in use. For example, LG TVs with ultra-thin screen technology can roll up into a base or ceiling, while Samsung's "The Frame" TV hangs on a wall and displays artwork or photography when not being watched. Companies are also creating smart-home devices from fabrics and designer materials that are more aesthetically pleasing and blend into existing decor. Startups UltraSense and Sentons use sound waves to produce touch interfaces on everyday surfaces made of wood, plastic and metal, while the Pillar Memory "smart wooden stick" from Japanese startup Mui Lab and graphic tablet producer Wacom looks like an ordinary block of wood, but can light up with notifications, icons and be used with a touchscreen stylus.

Such approaches are designed to reduce the tech-intimidation factor and help people become comfortable with the technology around them. "The goal isn't to add more devices and products," Federico Casalegno, chief design innovation officer of Samsung Design Innovation Center, said during a CES product demonstration. It's to "live better with more intuitive and simplified technologies."