

Chic Over Geek At CES '08

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(CBS) One of the trends I'm observing at the 2008 Consumer Electronics Show is the industry's transformation from geek to chic. It appears that lots of companies are taking a page from Apple's playbook by creating products that look as good (or maybe even better) than they work.

At their pre-CES press conferences, executives from both Philips and Samsung emphasized style as they unveiled their 2008 high-definition TVs and other offerings. Philips launched its "Design Collection" that the company's Consumer Lifestyle Chief Executive Officer, Andrea Ragnetti called "products with a simpler and softer, more sophisticated design. Something that touches the heart as well as the head."

Included among the products is a new 52-inch Ultimate Dream TV that features a translucent bevel. One reason for the emphasis on appearance, said Mr. Ragnetti, is the increasing role that women play as technology decision makers in the home. The era of the man of the house buying gear based purely on specifications is giving way to a more esthetic sense of how the technology fits into the home décor. The way I see it, women are a lot more practical than men. They're concerned about form as well as function.

New TVs from Samsung and other vendors reflect this trend as do new MP3 players from Sandisk including the remarkably well priced Sansa Clip which ranges from \$39.99 for a 1 GB model to only \$79.99 for a 4 GB player. Colors include black, blue, pink, red and silver.

Even some typically pedestrian hardware devices like Internet routers are sporting a new look. D-Link's new Xtreme N Gaming Router features the latest and fastest wireless Internet connections around in a box that's actually pleasant to look at.

No matter how good a piece of tech gear might look when it's in the showroom, it's not going to look very good if surrounded by a rat's nest of wires. That's certainly a problem in my house where my high-definition TV and audio system require multiple cables to handle a variety of input and output sources including DVD player, an Apple TV, an Xbox game console, a personal video recorder and a satellite receiver. My wife tries to hide the wires by putting up some pretty barriers on the floor between the main part of the room and where the entertainment system is but it's not working. Almost as soon as she finds a way to hide the cords, I come up with a new device and a couple of new cables.

But solutions are in sight. Pulse-Link and Westinghouse Digital introduced the first fully integrated wireless HDTV at CES. The TV has no wires except the power cord. With Pulse-Link's Wave UWB (ultra wideband), the TV is able to take in signals over the air from compatible personal video recorders, DVD players and other sources. Pulse-Link also makes adapters to retrofit other TVs and source devices that don't have the built-in technology.

There are plenty of other wireless solutions for cutting cords and clutter including wireless USB which can be used to connect PCs to printers, storage systems, cameras and other peripherals. The goal is to make it possible to transfer data between devices simply by having them in proximity to each other.

Speakers are another sore point when it comes to home décor. Not only are speaker wires untidy, but sometimes it's nearly impossible to get them across a room without creating a safety hazard. Parrot, which is a leading provider of Bluetooth hands free cell phone speakers and headsets and other wireless Bluetooth products is now offering a line of wireless speakers that can receive signals from compatible digital music players including many of the Bluetooth enabled cell phones with digital music capabilities.

logear has another twist on wireless speakers, using wires to cut down on wires. Its new Powerline Stereo System (\$329.95) takes advantage of the electrical wires already in your walls to get music or TV audio from the source to speakers that can be placed anywhere in the home. The kit includes a docking station that connects to the audio source and individual adapters for each set of speakers. Both the docking and the speaker adapters plug into electrical outlets.

With getting prettier and wires are on the verge of extinction, there is a new found emphasis on good looks here in Las Vegas. But don't worry - there are still plenty of geeky looking guys and gals walking up and down the halls of the Las Vegas Convention Center. This conference may be showing off fresh and innovative technology but even after only one day of the show, many of us walking the miles of aisles at CES and getting stuck in grid-lock traffic between venues are starting to look tired and bit worse for wear. Modern Internet routers are helping move data and breakneck speeds but getting around Vegas is slower than ever.

