

CES 2021: Key trends

by JWT Intelligence - Tuesday, January 19, 2021

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Much like the year that preceded it, the 2021 Consumer Electronics Show (CES) marked a drastic departure from past norms. While the excitement around new and innovative technology offered the usual air of glamour to the conference, the deeper undercurrent anchoring the show this year was much loftier.

In many keynotes, new product launches took a back seat to acknowledgment of the industry's shared, societal responsibility. "For so many years, CES has really played a remarkable role in bringing us all together and showing the world where technology is going. Showing people, literally, the future," Brad Smith, president of Microsoft, said in his keynote address. "Well, this year, I'd like to use my time to have a conversation about...what it means for all of us in the industry. What it means when we think about the promise of technology—and the peril, as well. And, perhaps most importantly, the responsibilities that...we all need to work together to address."

The vision of the future presented at this year's CES was unique in many ways—in part because, as Verizon CEO Hans Vestberg pointed out, the industry has been in a state of rapid acceleration. The past twelve months pushed fast-forward on innovations that would have otherwise taken years to materialize, and the industry is rushing to keep up.

"In 2020, one thing became very obvious, very quickly, as COVID-19 began to spread around the world: we leapfrogged five to seven years in the digital revolution," Vestberg said in his keynote address, which officially opened the conference. "Now, instead of being our future, it's our present: the future of productivity is now the current reality of work; the future of learning is now the current reality of school; the future of mobile payment is now the current reality of banking; and the future of streaming is now the current reality of entertainment."

CES has long served as the place where the present and future meet. This year, however, that place of pride moved into people's homes and onto their screens. And while it may have taken some of the wind out of CES's sails, it has also recalibrated the industry's approach to the future, putting humanity firmly at the center of technology.

Wellness assistants



Samsung's Bot Care (left) and Bot Handy (right)

Health was certainly top of mind this year, and many companies introduced new products to facilitate at-home health management. Samsung upgraded its Bot Care, which now learns its user's schedules and habits to help maintain personal wellbeing, offering suggestions like stepping away from the computer, going outside or getting some exercise.

Toto unveiled the Wellness Toilet, which tracks and analyzes the user's health and makes recommendations to improve wellness. Tatch is bringing sleep specialists to users' bedsides, with sensor patches that monitor sleeping patterns and offer personalized feedback.

And Philips was named a CES Innovation Award honoree for its Biosensor, a medical-grade sensor that measures and automatically transmits respiratory and heart rate. The Biosensor is one of a suite of health monitoring products, which include the Patient Monitoring Kit, which tracks vital signs, and the Sonicare Prestige 9900 smart toothbrush, which offers personalized oral health guidance.

Breath tech



Airthings Wave Plus

Unsurprisingly, upgraded masks and devices that improve air quality proliferated this year. A swathe of air monitors and purifiers were named Innovation Award honorees, including Airthings Wave Plus, which monitors levels of CO₂, humidity, temperature, and airborne pollutants to calculate the risk level of virus transmission in a building. Bulo, another honoree, measures lung capacity and endurance and

suggests customized breathing exercises.



Bulo

LG's PuriCare Wearable Air Purifier also earned an Innovation Award honoree badge. In addition to using HEPA filters, the device features a respiratory sensor that detects the cycle and volume of the wearer's breathing for a more comfortable experience. And Razer introduced its Project Hazel smart mask prototype, which auto-sterilizes between uses and includes voice amplifier technology for clear speech.

Privacy progresses

In what is becoming a yearly tradition, CES hosted a state of the union discussion on [privacy](#) with Big Tech leaders. The hot button panel, titled "Privacy and Trust with Amazon, Google and Twitter," points to the growing emphasis on digital protection in the tech industry.

The most noteworthy takeaway from this year's panel was its stark contrast in tone to last year's session. Last year, global privacy officers from Apple, Facebook and P&G were operating on the defensive, attempting to placate accusers without admitting wrongdoing, and often butting heads with a fellow panelist from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).



Privacy and Trust with Amazon, Google and Twitter

This year, in contrast, Amazon, Google and Twitter all expressed their hopes for clear federal legislation

regulating privacy, “so that companies know what the rules of the road are and individual users know what their rights and protections are,” said Keith Enright, Google’s chief privacy officer.

The panelists also agreed that successful privacy regulation and enforcement will be dependent on close collaboration between tech companies and regulatory bodies. “I want to have that conversation with the regulators that are standing over me,” Enright said. Ann Toth, director of Alexa Trust at Amazon, concurred. “There’s a lot of complexity in technology,” Toth said, “so the more we can talk these things out and have these kinds of conversations, hopefully the better the outcomes will be.”

While much has happened in the privacy space since last year’s conference, progress nevertheless remains murky. Google, Amazon and Twitter projected a message of clarity and optimism for the future of privacy, but this by no means solves the problems facing Big Tech and consumers alike when it comes to protecting user data.

Democratizing entertainment



Verizon

From sports to concerts, entertainment is becoming customizable for a viewer-led experience. In a spotlight session on the future of the fan experience, the National Hockey League (NHL) commissioner Gary Bettman pointed to new technology that helps “reach fans wherever, however they want to access content,” including a trackable hockey puck that offers viewers unparalleled insight into rate of play. Verizon also introduced “more immersive ways to watch and engage with the game than ever before, at home or in the stadium,” Verizon CEO Hans Vestburg revealed in his keynote address when announcing a partnership with the National Football League (NFL). The Verizon 5G Super Stadium experience in the NFL Lab offers seven different live camera angles for viewers to select from and augmented reality virtual players with layered stats.

Verizon will offer a similar customizable and augmented viewing experience for concerts through their partnership with Live Nation. And Sony premiered a new virtual concert experience that will be viewable on PlayStation VR and Oculus VR for a fully immersive concert at home.

Tech for the greater good

After a year of unprecedented health threats, economic uncertainty, social unrest and political instability,

CES 2021 offered an inflection point for the tech industry.



Microsoft keynote

In his keynote, Microsoft president Brad Smith shared a clip from a 1962 speech given by John F. Kennedy, in which Kennedy said, “technology has no conscience; whether it will become a force for good or ill depends on man.”

“Almost five decades later,” Smith mused, “there are those four words that echo down the ages: ‘technology has no conscience.’ It was true then, it is true today, it has been true in every era of technology. Technology has no conscience, but people do. *We* do. And as an industry, we must exercise our conscience...that is our responsibility: to ensure that the technology we create serves the world.”

Many joined Smith in taking the opportunity to pause and reflect on the greater purpose of technology. In the spotlight session titled “Stepping up to lead,” Proctor & Gamble’s (P&G) Chief Brand Officer Marc Pritchard announced P&G’s commitment to 2,021 acts of good in 2021 as part of its Lead with Love campaign.

Mary Barra, chairman and CEO of General Motors (GM), opened her keynote address saying that GM wants 2021 “to be a call to action,” citing their intention to become one of the most diverse companies in the world and announcing a \$1 million donation to online learning platform Khan Academy. “Because,” she concluded, “if this ambition, talent and technology doesn’t add up to a safer world for all, then it isn’t better.”

As Gary Shapiro, CEO of the Consumer Technology Association (CTA), said in his opening remarks: “Tech is a tool. And we have an opportunity to use it for good to improve lives.”

For more CES 2021 coverage, see [Automotive sanctuaries](#), [Home health havens](#) and [Entertainment upleveled](#).

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