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CES: Future Tech Shopping

in Commentary
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A trip through the main exhibit hall at the Consumer Electronics Show uncovers leading edge home gear that may find its way into the B2B IT channel and, perhaps, change the way business-users compute.

CES is unlike any of the other trade shows I attend during the year. Unlike the many channel and tech conferences I attend each year, this event is much more like “time warp shopping”; it’s a giant mall of things you might buy in the future.

Vendors are here looking for distributors for their products, or here to launch a new product line. Taken as a whole, you can see the trend in technology. Some ideas will fly, some won’t. My wife loves to remind me of the oven we saw that was Internet controlled from several years ago – clearly a product looking for a home… literally.

The focus here is consumer as the name suggests. That doesn’t mean it isn’t relevant to the IT channel. I’m not here reporting like other media outlets – think of this more like commentary. I’m here to get a sense of the way technology will look in 2010, and I’m happy to share this perspective.

CES is massive. Filling the Las Vegas Convention Center, the Hilton convention center, and parts of the Sands Convention Center (and more satellite locations) you can’t take it all in in one day. It’s simply too much.

This morning I toured the “Central Hall,” dedicated to many of the large consumer electronics giants you’re familiar with--Sony, Toshiba, Canon, Panasonic, Samsung, Motorola and Microsoft were among many of the big names. And there were lots of smaller companies like N-Computing and TCL. Windows 7 dominated Microsoft’s booth, as you would expect. Office 2010 was a focus as well, as well as Bing and Zune. “Windows Phone” and products like Mediaroom rounded out the display.

3D TVs are everywhere this year. Most required 3D glasses, and Sony in particular has a very impressive set of 3D displays. MLB “The Show” rendered in 3D is really impressive. What really knocked my socks off was TCL’s 3D TV that rendered 3D without the glasses. Crisp and clear, that picture was something to behold. These same TV vendors are showing off integration with services like YouTube, Pandora, and Flickr.

There is a dedicated eBook reader section, with a number of form factors differing from the Amazon Kindle and the Barnes & Noble Nook, including a unit with two “pages” and a stylus that actually allowed for notation on e-ink paper.

Finally, I spent a little time drooling over Samsung’s motion controls on a TV display. Much like Microsoft’s “Project Natal,” the user interface for this display was entirely done using gestures rendered in

front of the screen. Menu selections and changes were all done with simple hand gestures.

Multi-touch in devices is clearly a success – from the Apple iPhone to Google Android to Windows Phone, users have taken to gesture controls to manipulate information and their devices. Will the TV remote go the way of the stylus? I think we're seeing that change, as our devices react to our wants based on natural gestures.

What's striking is the focus on new ways to display information and interact with it. 3D may seem like an entertainment gimmick, but if displays could actually render information displayed in three dimensions, with no add ons (as TCL shows), this could be the next display for our computing devices. LCD and plasma TV manufacturers are channel players – look at the brand of your display, and you'll find it more from someone as a "consumer" manufacturer than a typical PC one.

Add in technologies like "slate computing" (shown off by Microsoft in its keynote) and interactive e-ink, and you may have new ways to interact with your data. If you couple these interface technologies with trends in data center, centralized, and cloud computing that we explore regularly in channel trade shows, we can see a new way to work. The implications for so-called "task workers" are immense – a centralized computing system where you interact with gesture and writing. Not so much science fiction as it used to be.

All this just from the Central Hall. I'll spend some time in South Hall, where more of the typical channel players live.

Scouring the South Hall for gems turned up a different tune. South Hall presents much more of the "gizmos" I'm used to seeing. I'm putting on Facebook the little (clearly unlicensed) flying "Star Stryker" which I'm sure no one at Skywalker Ranch has seen. Cable clips and more cases for cell phones than you would ever need lined the pathways, and I was concerned that South Hall, which used to contain a number of IT vendors, simply didn't anymore.

As I walked the paths, however, I came across Clear, who sell WiMax based broadband in some cities in the U.S. They have packages for offices and "on the go", and have already deployed in Las Vegas. While they aren't available in Washington, D.C. yet (later in 2010, I'm told), I began to notice the trend in WiMax gear spread throughout the South Hall. Sprint is clearly pushing their message of 4G, and there are a number of vendors all discussing 4G.

AT&T and Verizon may be battling it out over their 3G coverage, but it's apparent there is a brewing battle in the next generation of connectivity. As I've discussed before, bandwidth is going to be critical to the adoption of cloud computing based services, and the kinds of appliances that were displayed in the Central Hall are going to need more bandwidth. Despite efforts, not everywhere has the kind of connectivity required to make always on connections an absolute.

The trend is quite early – while WiMax gear has been at CES before, I felt like I hadn't seen as much of it, and certainly not seen carriers advertising it and making it available to the masses. More and more devices required this kind of connectivity, in fact – Garmin showed a line of connected GPS units that query the 'net and delivery up to the date event, traffic and weather information.

Without this kind of bandwidth, these devices won't be nearly as successful. The same goes for the trend in cloud computing, and it's promising to see carriers and vendors working to address this. Whether or not WiMax will be this technology that enables the bandwidth needed is yet to be seen, but the fact that there are vendors fighting it out means someone or something will emerge as the option for the future.

The other trend was cloud services itself. Multiple "online backup" services directed directly at the end consumer were on display. Again, the specific services aren't important. What's important is the fact that the market is pushing to the consumer. As these services see more and more coverage in the

media and in advertising, we'll see more business penetration of the concepts. If you're happy keeping your photos and life memories backed up online, you'll warm to the idea of your corporate data as well.

Neither of these two trends is unexpected. They've been covered before. This is simply validation of the trends on the business side, as other companies see opportunities in the consume space as much as the VAR community sees opportunities in the business space. This is a maturation of the market, not a revolutionary new concept.

But the flying Star Stryker – that's new.

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