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Dan’s Desk

Smart Homes

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I’m pretty sure that almost all of you have heard about having a ‘Smart Home’ and may be wondering what that’s all about. This month I’ll take a look at what that means and some of the issues to watch out for.

The most common starting point for setting up a smart home is to select a hub or main control point/device. There are thousands of smart [lights](https://www.tomsguide.com/us/philips-hue-connected-bulb,review-1870.html), [digital locks](https://www.tomsguide.com/us/best-smart-locks,review-3352.html), [security cameras](https://www.tomsguide.com/us/best-home-security-cameras,review-2741.html), [thermostats,](https://www.tomsguide.com/us/best-smart-thermostats,review-2751.html) and more, but if you want to control them all from a single verbal or screen interface, then you're going to need a smart home hub.

The Amazon Alexa, or an Echo as it was originally called back in November 2014 when it launched, was one of the first on that market that really took off. That was followed a couple of years ago by the Google Home hub (11/2016) and the Apple HomePod (1/2018). There are several others on the market such as the well rated Samsung Smartthings and the Hubitat Elevation hub, but I’ll concentrate on the Amazon products since those are the ones that I’m most familiar with.

Alexa comes in basically three styles from Amazon: the original Echo model which is about a 10 inch high 4 inch diameter cylindrical speaker with a light and microphone on the top; next came the Dot which was like a hockey puck in size with a much smaller speaker followed by the Show which was the first to offer a LCD screen to display information in addition to the ability to talk, which is a common feature across all models. You setup the device by connecting it to your Wi-Fi network through a smartphone app, and then selecting various capabilities or ‘skills’ through the app which programs the Alexa device. The Alexa device can be set to respond to a key word, which must be Echo, Alexa or Computer, such as ‘Alexa, what is the weather forecast in Orlando?’

Through the skills settings for the device, you can program it to be aware of and to control all of the other smart items in your house. In my house for example, I can tell Alexa to adjust the thermostat setting, show me who is at the front door, turn the outside lights on or off, turn the sprinklers on/off and control the volume on the TV. Many users have newer versions of TVs, cable or satellite boxes, channel streaming boxes like a Roku or Amazon Fire TV, pool pumps/heaters, robot vacuums, and garage door openers to mention just a few, that can all be controlled through the hub. At Christmas time, I wired the outside holiday lights to a Wi-Fi enabled extension cord that I used to control when the lights came on or off. The possibilities are really endless with the capability of controlling virtually every household appliance, gadget and other things that you may want to turn on or off today, not in the far future.

Now the reason that I wanted to write about this is because of what happened to my smart house when we experienced a lightning strike outside the house. A surge went through the internet cable running to my house and fried part of the circuitry in my cable modem. I have the modem connected to my own Wi-Fi router through a wired LAN cable, which is very common practice in a lot of homes today. My router could no longer connect to the internet, so all of the devices programmed to link through my Wi-Fi network could no longer communicate. The Wi-Fi in the cable modem itself still worked so I was able to switch my PCs over to it without any issues. However, Alexa, and all of the devices that it was linked to, could no longer be controlled. Of course, most devices have a manual mode of operation, so I could still adjust the temperature, and watch TV, etc. I could have spent time to reprogram Alexa and every device to use the weaker cable modem Wi-Fi, but it was a lot simpler to just wait for the next day when Spectrum came out and replaced the faulty pieces, so my main Wi-Fi router could resume normal operations. It was amazing to see how easily we had adjusted to the smart home automation capabilities and how we had to think about what to do for certain functions that were now automated.

Our Web Master, Curt Postic has a great deal of experience programming Alexa to do more than I do, such as making phone calls through his Alexa, so take a look at his monthly web master reports for the latest advancements in this ever-evolving Smart Home saga!

If you have suggestions for other topics like this, that you would like to see explained, please let me know!