

# Recommending Ring doorbells is as tough as ever, but new security changes are a plus

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Where does a product reviewer's responsibility end?

I'm a product reviewer. And whether I'm testing out a thermostat, a spin

bike or a security camera, I'm full of questions—and those questions always start with the hardware. CNET has published countless articles detailing exactly how we test products, but here are some general thoughts that immediately come to my mind as a smart home gadget tester:

- What's the installation like? Was it easy or hard? Why, specifically?
- Is the app streamlined or clunky? Does it enhance (or at least not impede) using this product? How?
- Is the device well designed? Will it likely hold up over time? Are any parts fiddly?
- Does the product itself do what it claims to do? Were there any surprises? What, exactly?
- How does this model compare to others from competitors? Is this the "best" one?
- Does it work with other smart home products, including voice assistants? Are the integrations helpful?

Of course, the questions shift depending on the exact product, but you get the idea. I receive a product, try out the product—and then tell you all about it.

With [privacy](#) and [security issues](#) now the norm in consumer tech, there are new considerations. What happens, for instance, when a product performs well, but you have a hard time recommending it because of genuine concern about a company's policies?

Smart home device maker Ring has been one of my biggest challenges as a product reviewer to date. It certainly isn't alone: Facebook, I'm looking at you. But testing Ring doorbells and security cameras has raised so many additional questions for me about a reviewer's role in recommending—or not recommending—a product.

The line between fitness for consumers and company policy is becoming incredibly blurry, especially for products that have internet-connected cameras and microphones. That's why we need to consider the complete picture, although that consideration doesn't always line up neatly with the product review format CNET has relied on for more than a quarter century.

Bottom line: It can't be just about the hardware anymore.

## Some Ring history

Ring makes smart doorbells, security cameras, smart lights and a home security system. Its products work with Amazon Alexa smart speakers—and a variety of third-party devices. The security brand, which Amazon purchased two years ago, has been in the news a lot as privacy and security have becoming increasingly important topics for smart home devices and their related software.

In 2018, Ring filed two patents for facial recognition technology. As of writing this, Ring still hasn't added facial recognition capabilities to its doorbells and [security cameras](#), but one of the patents detailed sending face scans through law enforcement databases. It does offer person alerts, however, to differentiate between standard motion and when a Ring camera thinks it sees a person.

Ring currently partners with local police departments, giving customers the chance to opt-in to a "Neighbors" program that allows them to share saved video clips with police. The company previously gave police departments access to heat maps indicating where Ring devices were installed.

In December 2019 the [personal information](#) of over 3,600 Ring users was exposed. Again, Ring isn't the only company to spark concerns

about privacy and security, but a combination of Ring's own privacy and security issues led us to remove all of its products from our recommendations late last year.

It wasn't the hardware: Ring's products still functioned the same as always. It was the policies behind the hardware that gave us pause.

"Protecting our customers' privacy, security and control over their devices and personal information is foundational to Ring, and we're constantly working to deliver on this commitment," a Ring spokesperson told CNET. "This was demonstrated most recently when we were the first smart home security company to make a second layer of verification mandatory for all of our customers. We will continue to add features to protect user privacy and enhance data security as we work towards our mission of making neighborhoods safer.

"Ring's products are intended to be used on private property, and we require all of our customers to comply with any applicable laws when setting up their Ring devices," the spokesperson added. "We've taken steps to help customers respect people's privacy while using their devices, including (the Privacy Zones feature and free Ring stickers)."

## **The complete picture**

Ring made a lot of policy updates in early 2020 to improve things, including introducing a privacy Control Center and mandatory two-factor authentication for new products. The Control Center acts as a dashboard for customers, a place to more easily view and make changes to privacy and security settings. Two-factor authentication enlists a second layer of security to "authenticate" the person trying to access the account. In Ring's case, a unique code is sent to your phone, which you have to enter to in addition to your regular login details.

Because of those efforts, and after internal discussions and lots of careful consideration, we've decided to reopen Ring products for recommendation, starting with the \$230 Ring Video Doorbell 3 Plus, which I just tested.

As customers ask more questions about device privacy and [security](#), so will we. We'll continue to delve into the nonhardware side of things as part of our regular reviews, and, as needed, we'll address these topics further in standalone stories like these. As always, our goal is to make sure you have all the information you need to make an informed buying decision. More and more, that means giving you the complete picture of a company, not just why a certain product did or didn't work as well as expected. All of that informs a recommendation, or a lack of one—and in rare cases, it could be why we might remove a product or entire brand from our recommendations.

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