

New Google Nest Audio speaker packs a huge punch for \$99

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The old Google Home that looked like an air freshener has been reinvented, renamed and redesigned to rock out.

Now known as Nest Audio, the new editions look more like a tiny, traditional speaker, this time in a multitude of colors (pink, blue, green, white and black), and sell for less than the original Home (\$99.99 versus \$129.99). And the big news is a major sound upgrade.

Nest Audio, available Monday, is still being sold as a [personal assistant](#) to run your [smart home](#), answer trivia questions, set reminders, get news updates, translate languages and, of course, play [music](#) and podcasts.

But the speaker, which runs on the Google Assistant, still lags Amazon's Echo speakers and the Alexa system in many obvious tasks that various Google help pages claims it can do but either can't or require so much setup that consumers will be stymied.

But let's start with what does work well: playing music.

For \$99, you get a speaker with vastly improved sound than the original, in a slightly larger body. I frankly didn't expect it to sound as good as it did. It's a \$99 speaker. How good could it sound?

In a word, fantastic.

In my subjective, nonscientific tests, I'm giving it a 6 out of 10, compared with a 7 out of 10 for the most expensive \$199 Sonos One, which has been the gold standard for higher fidelity audio in a smart speaker. We put both speakers back to back for the test.

But spend \$200 to buy two Nest Audio speakers, and pair them like many used to in traditional stereo setups, with the left speaker on one side of the room and the right speaker on the other, and this trumps them all, with not just stellar bass and treble and volume that rocks but separation of the instruments and vocals the way they're supposed to sound.

Google calls this the "ultimate listening experience," and while I won't go that far—the Sonos system with multiple speakers still has way richer and fuller sound—those Sonos speakers are very pricey, about \$1,000 for two "Five" speaker." But for \$200 and two Nest Audio speakers, you can jam your socks off at home.

Of course, Google is using the improved music as one selling point. The other is to put the Google Assistant to work.

One quibble: You would think that after three years of marketing a speaker to take on Alexa, Google would finally have found a way for its speaker to do simple things like read back your latest text message or (Google!) e-mails. Or to let you compose a text or e-mail with your voice and send it out.

Alexa can do it. (There's setup involved, but it can be done.) But say "Hey, Google, read my latest e-mails," and the voice responds, "Sorry, I can't help with e-mail yet." (But of course, it can, on any Android phone, using the Assistant.) And Google online promos for the Assistant claims this can be done on Google speakers.

And on and on.

I had trouble even adding potatoes to a shopping list initially. The Assistant says we need to change the permissions in the Google Assistant smartphone app, but good luck finding where to do that, because it doesn't tell you.

Here's what you have to do: Open the Google Assistant app (not the Google Home app, which is where you might expect to go), click on the icon with your picture in a circle at the top right, and click "Devices" and then the device you want to change, like Nest Audio. Make sure "Personal Results" is selected.

Once you've worked out the kinks, you'll go back to music listening. You'll need to subscribe to a music streaming service to get the most of the experience, and if you're a fan of Amazon Music or Apple Music, you're out of luck. Google's choices includes its own YouTube Music, Spotify and Pandora.

Consumers who don't have a smart speaker have to ask themselves how they feel about having Google in the home, listening to everything you say. Google says it listens (and records you) only when you use the "Hey Google," or "OK Google," wake word, and in its promotional website, reminds that you can delete your history by saying, "Hey Google, delete what I just said."

However, that's only for what you just said. Google has a history of your queries going back 18 months, and beyond the inane questions, it also picks up snippets of your conversation that aren't questions.

Earlier this year, we tracked how dummy phrases read aloud were transcribed by Google, word for word.

The phrase: "We are told that Google only records you if you first use the wake word. Then how to explain this, huh?"

It recorded and transcribed every other query as well.

Google invites you to delete your recordings and keystrokes manually, or automatically every three or 18 months.

Google's privacy violations aren't any worse than Alexa and Amazon, which dominates smart speakers. However, if you want a convenient, small [speaker](#) with fantastic sound that can run your smart home and help with trivia, that's a decision you'll have to make.

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