

Major CES gadget show turns to tech for virtual salvation

January 10 2021, by Glenn Chapman



The Consumer Electronics Show in previous years drew more than 150,000 industry professionals to La Vegas, but this year's event will be online only as a result of the global pandemic

The Consumer Electronics Show known for crowds, sensory-overload, and deal-making is relying on technology it has long hawked to put

pizzazz into its first virtual event, kicking off Monday.

The deadly pandemic that has derailed in-person conferences around the world during the past year forced the Consumer Technology Association to follow suit with an online version of the annual gathering in Las Vegas.

"CES is one of the most experiential events in the world, where attendees can actually see and touch and experience the latest innovations," CTA spokeswoman Jean Foster said during a briefing ahead of the show.

"And while we can't recreate that magic that happens in Las Vegas, we can bring our audiences a new and unique whole digital experience."

Show organizers worked with Microsoft to build an [online platform](#), and help exhibitors craft video presentations, digital press kits, and chat forums for engaging with attendees.

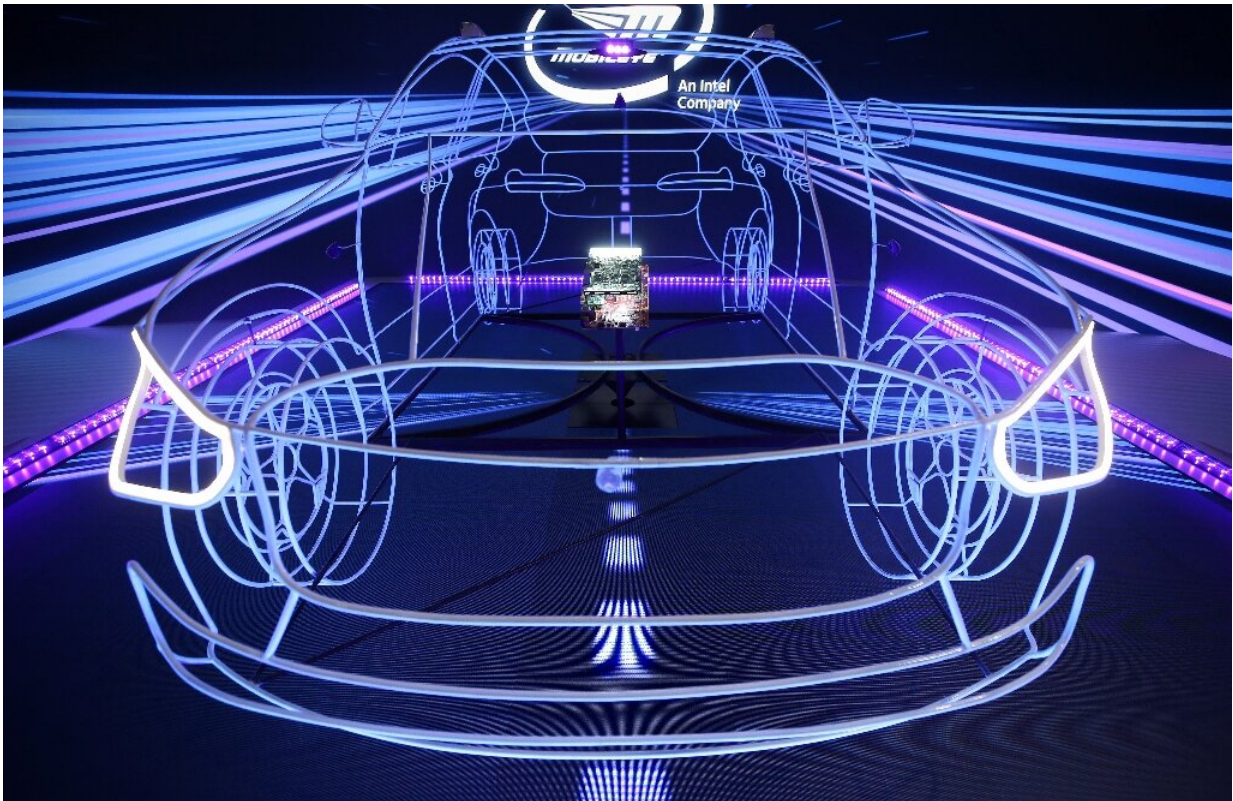
"We really built around the concept of people being able to interact with each other," Foster said, noting that Microsoft Teams video-conferencing software was a strong component of the platform.

'Broadcast experience'

The digital version of CES will be a "true broadcast experience," the centerpiece of which will be an online "anchor desk" staffed by [social media](#) and tech news veterans.

The anchor desk will stream interviews, announcements, analysis, and keynote presentations, as well as recap daily events and preview what is ahead, according to Foster.

More than 100 hours of CES programming is planned, with many presentations captioned in more than a dozen languages.



Despite the lack of in-person events, the Consumer Electronics Show is being held in digital format and will be showcasing innovations for smart devices, autonomous cars and more

Digital CES is relying on artificial intelligence to match interests indicated in attendee profiles with exhibitors, hoping to put a software spin on the serendipity of stumbling upon cool products on show-floors.

Software will recommend people or exhibitors to connect with, and provide tools for online meetings or chats.

Mellow media day?

A media day typically packed with press conferences in Las Vegas ballrooms will be replaced with streamed video presentations from companies, the list of which includes Hisense, LG, Samsung and Sony.

Freed from the Las Vegas time zone, CES press conferences will start early-morning New York time and continue into the evening.

Presentations from keynotes to press conferences will be shorter than they have been at real-life CES events to account for limited attention spans and allow time for fielding questions.

CES has more than 300 speakers lined up, and a heightened focus on sessions diving into issues such as privacy and 5G internet.

Sessions will be immediately available for replay on demand, and remain accessible until mid-February, according to CES organizers.

When the virtual show floor opens on Tuesday, attendees will be able to click into online exhibition booths for demos and chats.

"A lot of companies are putting a lot of energy into creating a great online experience," Accenture global software and platform leader Robin Murdoch told AFP.

"One thing we've learned is that we're all willing to try new things digitally."



Consumer Technology Association CEO Gary Shapiro, seen at the 2020 Consumer Electronics Show, says the massive tech event had to be adapted to digital format this year at a significant cost

Returning to Vegas

Building the digital platform was a major investment "in the seven figures," according to CTA president Gary Shapiro.

Off-the-shelf solutions didn't meet CES needs when it came "serendipity, discovery, connecting and the joy of learning," Shapiro said during the briefing.

"We can't recreate, obviously, some of the things in Las Vegas like the

gambling and the ambiance and the face-to-face human five-sense contact," he said.

Organizers shunned the idea of attendee avatars wandering around a virtual CES world.

Despite the investment, Shapiro expected the digital CES to be a learning experience, lessons from which would be used to enhance a "hybrid" event next year with a physical gathering in Las Vegas.

"We love technology and what it's doing," Shapiro said.

"But, it's really not the same as being their face-to-face."

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Citation: Major CES gadget show turns to tech for virtual salvation (2021, January 10) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2021-01-major-ces-gadget-tech-virtual.html>

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