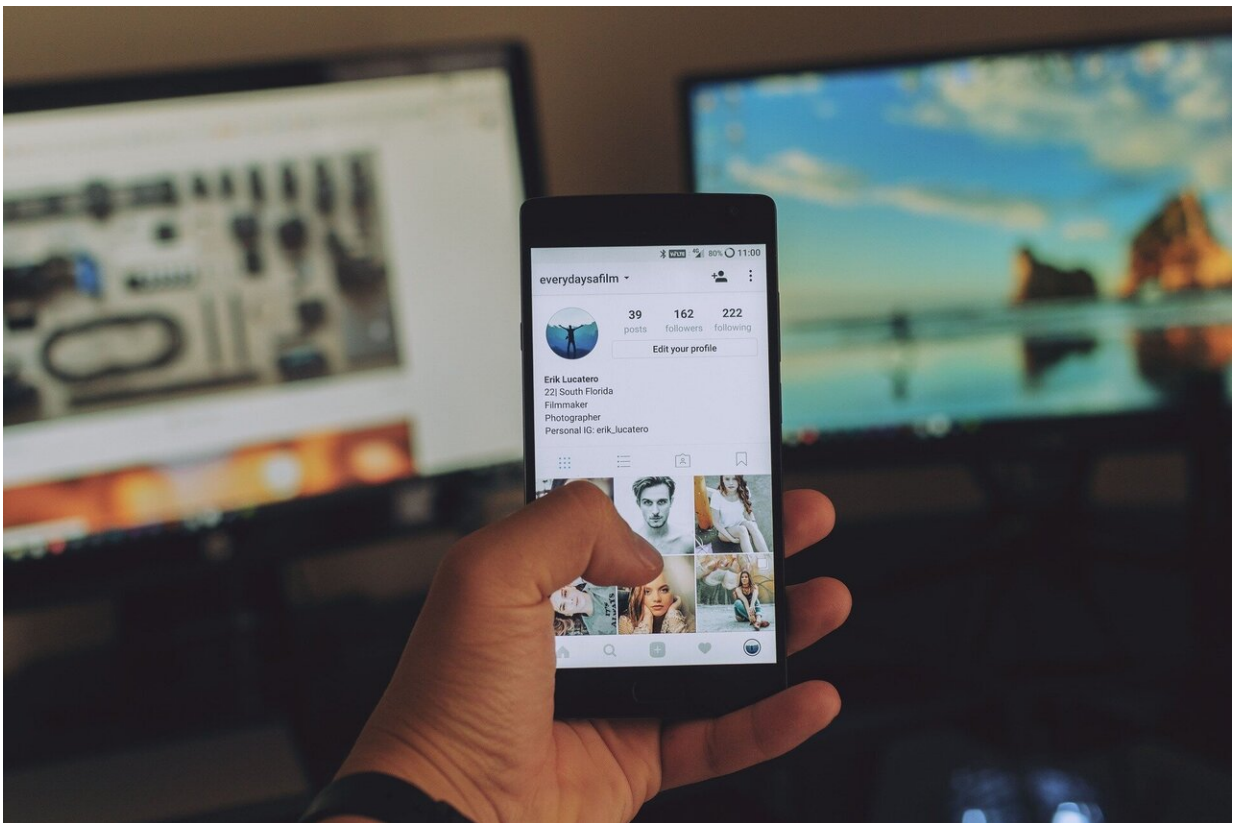


This year's CES show: Still must-see technology, but done virtually

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Bigger TVs, mobile electronics, automobile technology, digital health, privacy—and, of course—robots.

The hot topics expected to dominate the 2021 CES show, kicking off officially Monday, may sound familiar. But the annual high-tech mecca where most of the biggest names in electronics, telecommunications and software show off [new products](#) will be anything but.

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to afflict the nation, hundreds of thousands of attendees will not descend on Las Vegas to ogle super-thin OLED displays or listen to the latest advances in audio. Instead, this year's CES will more likely resemble a videoconferencing meetup in Zoom or Microsoft Teams—but on steroids.

Exhibitors such as LG and Sony and will show off their wares virtually with high production-quality presentations for retailers, analysts and media, all connected online.

Hundreds of smaller, startup tech firms will still use the multi-day event, which runs through Thursday, to unveil projects and plans to pique the interest of consumers, as well as investors. But these face-to-face meetings will take place in cyberspace instead.

Speakers such as Walmart CEO Doug McMillon and GM CEO Mary Barra will address more than 150,000 attendees remotely, with some speeches and panel discussions broadcast from a video production studio on Microsoft's Redmond, Washington campus.

Coronavirus compromises

Even before last spring at the Consumer Technology Association, the trade group that conducts the CES, it was accepted an unconventional gathering would be inevitable.

Discussions to change the format of the annual tech show, first held in 1967, had begun in March. Initially, an in-person/virtual hybrid event

was considered, but that was tossed aside as it became doubtful a vaccine would be available and widely distributed by January 2021.

In July, an all-digital virtual strategy was agreed upon. "We wanted our customers, exhibitors and attendees and everyone to be able to plan not to go to Las Vegas and not to make commitments," said CTA president and CEO Gary Shapiro. "That was the most painful for us. Ultimately, and obviously, it was the right decision."

Next, CTA reviewed dozens of videoconferencing platforms to find one that could handle tens of thousands of concurrent participants. The group chose Microsoft to help create a digital venue. "We not only wanted some customization but they have experience with Microsoft Teams," Shapiro said. "They have cybersecurity experience. They have a huge cloud—we needed to have a lot of people on at once—and they had done their own events."

Attendees will be greeted on the CES home page by live videos—à la Sportscenter—hosted by personalities who will deliver news updates and give advice on how to navigate the online venue. Viewers can submit questions during anchors' live interviews.

Registrants can opt in to online networking and contact each other. "To me it's beyond cool that we've created our own little LinkedIn environment for connectivity and planning," Shapiro said.

CES is virtual, but still a way to connect

Companies seem to appreciate that CES is happening, even if it is not in person. Already, the number of companies wanting to participate has surpassed Shapiro's expectations. About more than 1,800 are registered and CTA plans to limit the number to 2,000. Plus, the staff has to review all the content to be broadcast because the audience is global.

The good news for participating companies: the CES digital venue remains live for 30 days, until Feb. 15.

San Diego-based IKIN has attended CES for several years but this particular show is crucial as it will be displaying its new hologram technology, which it hopes to bring to market in the third quarter of 2021. It will be demonstrating a product that attaches to a smartphone and creates 3-D holograms from 2-D video on the phone—and can be viewed in daylight, a bugaboo that has thwarted holographic technology.

At CES, the tech company will be showing off its prototype to potential sellers and investors. "Of course, we will miss the opportunities for face-to-face engagements and in-person demonstrations," said IKIN president and CEO Joe Ward. "But we will certainly take advantage of the virtual format in every way possible. The virtual show does provide a dimension of schedule flexibility that will help us engage with customers, developers, and partners."

At Otter Products, corporate public relations manager Kristen Tatti said, "I don't think it ever was a question that ... we should participate" in CES. The Fort Collins, Colo. company makes Otterbox mobile device accessories including phone chargers, cases, and screen protectors.

"One nice thing about it being digital is it actually is more inclusive. So folks that maybe weren't about to go to Las Vegas before are going to be able to experience CES," Tatti said.

In agreement is Grace Dolan, who is Samsung Electronics' vice president of home entertainment marketing. A virtual CES gives the global TV and smartphone leader an opportunity to connect with a wider audience. "We're excited about CES this year because it provides an opportunity for a much more expansive group of people to get their foot in the door," she said. "In the past it's been primarily media, a lot of our special

retailers, and now it's the broad audience of all consumers who have any interest in our products."

Samsung's First Look event, where the company unveiled new TVs coming out in 2021, can be viewed on YouTube and its corporate site. The company's Monday CES press conference will be posted online, too.

Most of the 100-plus hours of video that will be housed on the CES virtual venue will be captioned in 16 languages and American Sign Language "to make it very accessible," said Jean Foster, CTA senior vice president of marketing and communications.

Still, a virtual gathering is not the same. Video streaming device and content company Roku typically has a suite where products are displayed and meetings are held with retailers, partners including those who make Roku TVs, and content companies with channels on the company's streaming devices.

There will still be meetings, but says Mark Ely, Roku's vice president of product strategy, "we are not all coming together so, as a result, it feels a bit different."

COVID-19 pandemic's impact

Many of the hot topics at this year's CES have been evolving for years. But nearly all of them now have accelerated due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"We saw consumers were completely changing the way they were using our products as their needs changed. Everybody knows consumers started working from home, they started schooling from home, working out from home. Gaming surged and streaming surged," Samsung's Dolan said. "We responded. We completely renovated the role of TV in the

home."

New features in Samsung's TVs include a personal fitness trainer and new wider screen gaming mode.

The theme of change will flow throughout CES, Shapiro says. Spurred by the COVID-19 crisis, "the digital transformation went forward 10 years in under one (year) and that's continuing. Companies are still scrambling to catch up with it," he said.

Technological innovation advanced, for sure, but so did everyday transactions. "How business is done changed," Shapiro said. "It's curbside pickup. It makes your head explode all the different changes. Digital health care. Home health care. That is a huge part of the show."

For CTA, which is planning for a hybrid in-person-virtual event in 2022, to skip CES in a year with all this ongoing change would have been a been a miscue.

Instead, it's become a "once in a lifetime opportunity—which hopefully we will never have again—to just have a purely digital event," Shapiro said.

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