

CES tech fair opens under pandemic shadow

January 5 2022, by Joshua Melvin



An attendee wears an AIR2 x MicroClimate full face mask at The Venetian Expo during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) on January 5, 2022 in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The CES tech show threw open its doors Wednesday in Las Vegas despite surging Covid-19 cases in the United States, as one of the world's largest trade fairs tried to get back to business.

Despite some obvious gaps on the showfloor—after high-profile companies like Amazon and Google cancelled over climbing virus risk—crowds of badge-wearing tech entrepreneurs, reporters and aficionados poured through venues.

"Since the numbers of people are down, there's a lot more space between people. My anxiety levels are fine," said attendee Blake Olson, who noted though that the energy level was lower, likely because of the smaller crowd.

But the usual universe of tech gadgets, concepts and prototypes, ranging from humanoid robots to autonomous cars, were on display.

Organizers cited their vaccine and mask requirements, while insisting the show—with participants from nearly two dozen nations—had to go on.

"Despite a few well-publicized cancellations amongst our exhibitors, we have over 2,200 exhibitors here at CES 2022 in Las Vegas, and all of them are counting on us to move forward," Steve Koenig, a vice president from the group that runs the convention.

"Why? Well, because these businesses are looking for investors, they're looking for partners, they're looking to conduct business," he added.



The Engineered Arts Ameca humanoid robot with artificial intelligence gestures as it is demonstrated during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES).

Some health experts have voiced caution that people may not universally respect the mask mandate.

The event has been cut back by a day to end Friday, and the scale of the show will be sharply reduced with fewer than half the roughly 4,500 exhibitors that turned up for the last in-person edition in 2020—just before pandemic lockdowns hit the United States.

The hybrid nature of the gathering was in evidence even in its opening moments, with GM CEO Mary Barra delivering her keynote address remotely.

"Obviously I'm not on stage at CES in Las Vegas, I'm actually on the stage of the historic Fox Theatre in Detroit," Barra said in her address.

Online just isn't the same

The show is being held using software developed by Web Summit, a European technology conference.

"There's no walking, there's no noise, there's no distractions," Paddy Cosgrave, Web Summit founder, said of the upsides of joining online.



Sony chief executive officer Kenichiro Yoshida unveils the Sony Vision-S SUV prototype electric vehicle.

"But I don't personally believe that you can mimic online the quality of an actual in-person, humans-to-human interaction."

Despite a thinner crowd, the show floor will still hold firms hawking everything from quirky gadgets to technology aimed at humanity's deepest concerns.

One of the top items on the menu for the 2022 edition is transportation, increasingly electric and autonomous.

Space-related technologies are making a strong entrance, after a year that saw peaking interest in space tourism and the development of satellite internet.



A scale model of the Sierra Space Large Integrated Flexible Environment (LIFE) habitat, part of an Orbital Reef space station, is displayed at the company's booth ahead of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

And of course, the metaverse is on everyone's mind, although its definition remains fluid.

The concept refers to the emergence of a world where digital and real worlds are combined, and which humans will access via augmented and virtual reality equipment.

Born out of science fiction, it has become one of tech's hottest topics since Facebook announced colossal investments in the field and renamed itself Meta.

But for now, the industry is also focused on more immediate challenges, such as global chip shortages and supply delays, which are delaying new product launches.

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