

Here are the 'Worst in Show' CES products, according to consumer and privacy advocates

January 11 2024, by Matt O'brien



People walk by a CES sign during the CES tech show, Jan. 10, 2024, in Las Vegas. The best CES products pierce through the haze of marketing hype at the Las Vegas gadget show to reveal innovations that could improve lives. The worst could harm us or our society and planet in such “innovatively bad” ways that a panel of self-described dystopia experts has judged them “Worst in Show.” The third annual contest that no tech company wants to win announced its decisions Thursday, Jan. 11, and faults a number of well-known brands including BMW, Amazon, Instacart and Sennheiser. Credit: AP Photo/John Locher

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AND THE AWARD GOES TO

"From easily hackable lawn mowers to \$300 earbuds that will fail in two years, these are products that jeopardize our safety, encourage wasteful overconsumption, and normalize privacy violations," says the group of consumer and privacy advocates judging the awards. The contest has no affiliation with CES or the trade group that [runs the expo](#).

They made the choices based on how uniquely bad a product is, what impact it could have if widely adopted and if it was significantly worse than previous versions of similar technology. The judges represent groups including Consumer Reports, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and right-to-repair advocates iFixit.

DANGEROUS CARTECH

[Automotive technology](#) is annually a big focus at CES. And two brickbats were awarded to carmaker BMW, one of those involving a partnership with Amazon's voice assistant Alexa.



People look in a car used to demonstrate BMW's in-car personal assistant that uses Amazon's Alexa large language model to answer questions about its cars at the BMW booth during the CES tech show Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024, in Las Vegas. Credit: AP Photo/John Locher

Powered by a large language model—the type of AI system behind chatbots like ChatGPT—Amazon says an Alexa "car expert" will be able to provide "quick instructions and answers about vehicle functions in a much more human, conversation-like manner, and even act on your behalf."

Being able to ask Alexa to unlock the front door or turn off the porch light sounds convenient.

But what if it's being voiced by a violent ex?

"We have seen an increasing number of horrific stories where people, generally women, who are trying to escape abusive domestic situations end up having their cars serve as tracking and abuse vectors," said a "Worst in Show" judge's comment from Cindy Cohn, executive director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

She added, "Alexa and BMW—and frankly all of the car companies who are racing to turn our cars into tracking devices—need to ensure that victims can turn this off."

BMW Group spokesperson Jay Hanson said the company designed and delivered the voice assistant with privacy in mind and customers have the choice of whether they want to use it.

"BMW and Amazon share a strong commitment to maintaining customers' trust and protecting their privacy, including giving them control over their data," he said in an email Thursday.



Xreal Air augmented reality glasses sit in a car during an augmented reality driving demonstration at the BMW booth during the CES tech show Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024, in Las Vegas. Credit: AP Photo/John Locher

BMW is also showcasing augmented-reality glasses designed by Xreal that are supposed to overlay helpful information and virtual objects that you'll see ahead of you as you're driving. Another judge called it a "recipe for distracted driving" that also could pave the way for a future of vision-obscuring ads.

Hanson said the augmented reality experience demonstrated at CES was a showcase of "potential use cases" that could aid or entertain people but that minimizing driver distraction remains a key principle in what BMW rolls out to customers.

EARBUD DUDS

German audio electronics-maker Sennheiser showcased the fourth generation of its Momentum True Wireless ear headphones, which are usually known to last for a while.

But iFixit CEO Kyle Wiens says the latest \$300 earbuds are a "betrayal of the brand" because they're too disposable, with three separate batteries that will likely fail after a few years and can't easily be replaced.



A person wears Xreal Air augmented reality glasses while taking an augmented reality driving demonstration at the BMW booth during the CES tech show Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024, in Las Vegas. Credit: AP Photo/John Locher

"Start by selling batteries and releasing repair instructions," he wrote. "Then work on making the battery easier to swap."

Sennheiser didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

WHO ASKED FOR MORE GROCERY ADS?

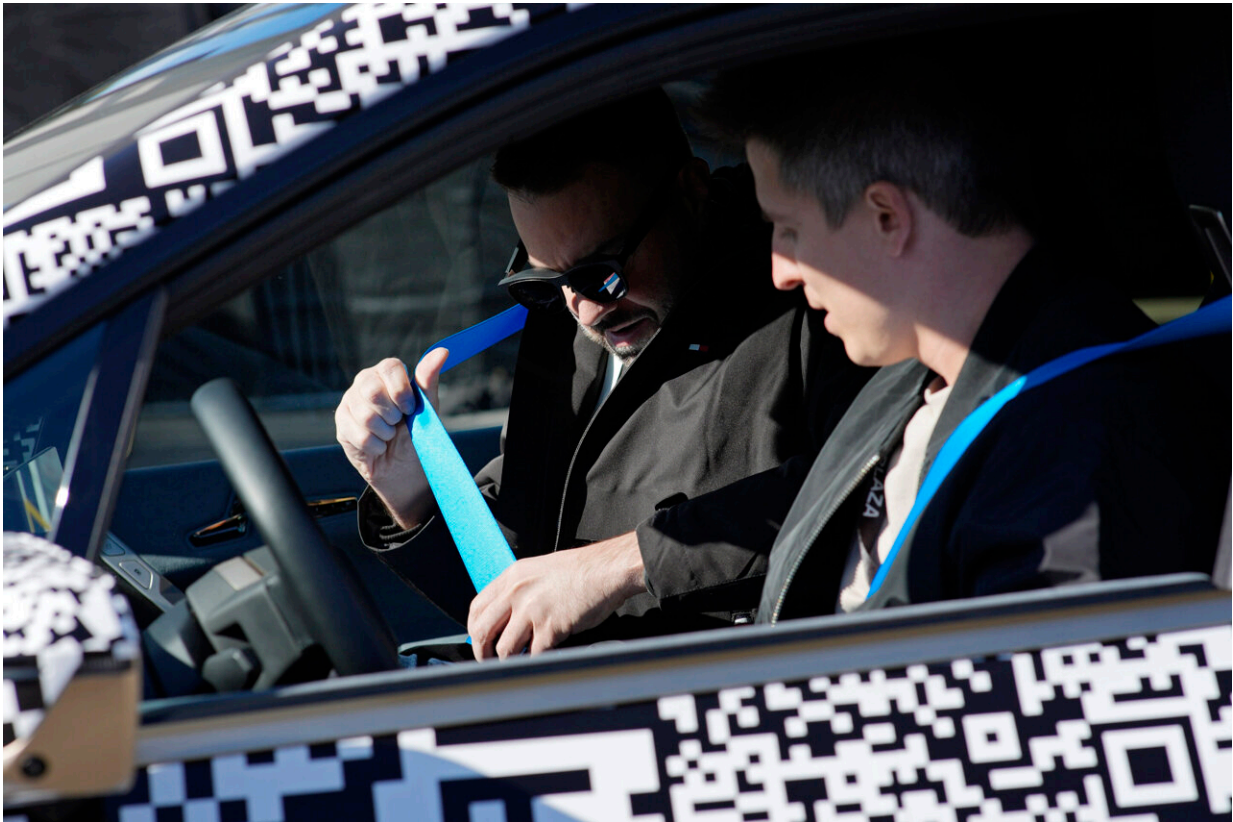
Nathan Proctor, the national campaign director for U.S. PIRG, a consumer advocacy group, selected as his "Worst in Show" the new video ads on Instacart's ["AI-powered" shopping cart](#).

General Mills, Del Monte Foods and Dreyer's Grand Ice Cream are among the companies that will advertise on the carts during an upcoming pilot at West Coast stores owned by Good Food Holdings.

Equipped with cameras and sensors, the cart has a screen that will share real-time recommendations based on what customers put in the cart, like advertising ice cream if a customer buys cones.

"It uses historic shopping behavior to push junk foods you've bought before," Proctor wrote. "Grocery stores are overwhelming and navigating promotions is exhausting, and I question the sanity of whoever thought we should make it worse."

Instacart didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.



A person wears Xreal Air augmented reality glasses while taking an augmented reality driving demonstration at the BMW booth during the CES tech show Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024, in Las Vegas. Credit: AP Photo/John Locher

ROBOT VACUUMS AND 'MACROWAVES'

The cybersecurity "Worst in Show" went to China-based robot vacuum-maker Ecovacs. Robotic vacuums are nothing new, but Paul Roberts of Secure Repairs says the new X2 Combo combines all the elements for intrusive home surveillance—cameras, microphones, LiDAR, voice recognition and computer vision that can recognize objects—without any guarantee that its unencrypted images or video feed can't be hacked.

The environmental impact "Worst in Show" went to one of many

internet-connected [food tech appliances](#) showcased at CES 2024. Revolution Cooking's \$1,800 "macrowave" combines a microwave with a convection oven but such trendy gadgets are typically short-lived and encourage people to trash the simpler appliances they already have, according to Shanika Whitehurst of Consumer Reports.

"Adding electronics to perfectly functional appliances dramatically increases their environmental impact, requiring vast amounts of resources and energy," she wrote.

Revolution Cooking and Ecovacs didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

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