

Smart home guide: What you need to know to get plugged in to the connected life

December 23 2019, by Jefferson Graham



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If the idea of asking Alexa or Google to turn on and off your lights appeals to you, and you're not doing it already, the holidays could be a great time to finally get to it.

"Competition is growing and prices are dropping which makes now the best time to make your home," smart, says YouTuber Steve Siems, who has a channel called "Steve Does," devoted to smart home reviews and installation.

He suggests starting small, with a connected speaker, then adding smart switches and bulbs before venturing further with doorbells and other products.

"See what you like and what you need more of," he says. "No need to buy 10 smart plugs then realize you only need three for what you want to do. By the time you use the other seven plugs, something newer, better, and cheaper will be out."

Should I get Google Assistant or Alexa?

First, decide who you want in your home, the Google Assistant or Amazon's Alexa. Alexa is available on more devices, while Google tends to be a little smarter and more versatile in answering questions about arcane subjects. Both will do the basics—turn and off your smart lights, tell you who's at the door and open your garage door.

If you use an Android phone, you're already living in Googleland and you may be more comfortable with the Assistant. Amazon doesn't have a smartphone and will be sending you back and forth to the [smartphone app](#), on Apple and Android devices, to set up skills.

But not all products work with Google or Amazon, or vice versa. Facebook's Portal video chat device for TVs works only with Alexa, as does Sony's line of smart noise-canceling headphones, while the Nest doorbell only answers to Google.

And while the Sonos Move speaker works with both, it's one or the

other. At setup, you have to decide on Alexa or Google.

Many of the smart products also work with Apple's "HomeKit," which means the Siri personal assistant. While Apple has a home speaker, the HomePod, it's still sold very poorly and hasn't been updated, while Google and Amazon aggressively discount and market their wares.

What smart devices do I need?

Amazon's Echo Dot and Google's Nest Mini are the entry-level models, tiny speakers with tinny sound that will do the job. The Dot sells for \$25 and the Mini for \$35, but both could see their prices slashed after the holiday. The top-of-the-line Echo is the Echo Studio, a high-end speaker selling for \$199, while Google's top is the \$249 Max. Both companies also offer video display units, which are great as digital photo frames and video viewers, like the Echo Show and Google's Nest Hub and Hub Max. They're a nice addition for smart home products like doorbells and [security cameras](#), to see who's at the door or prowling around outside.

What you need to know on smart plugs

The easiest smart home accessory should be your first purchase. With the smart plug, available for around \$25, from a variety of companies, like WEMO and Amazon's house brand, you plug it into your regular outlet and then add ordinary "dumb" legacy products like coffee pots, lamps and the like into the smart plug. Now, you can use an app (or voice commands) to turn them on. A new addition this year on many shelves multiplies smart plugs to a bigger, more functional accessory in a smart strip.

The Kasa by TP-Link sells for \$59.99 and has six outlets to run fans, Christmas lights, lamps and the like from one central location. Plus, you

get a surge protector and outlets to charge three USB devices. Like the smart plug, you can use voice command to turn on and off the products.

The pros and cons of smart lights

Asking Alexa or Google to change the color of a lamp from white to red is about as cool as it comes. And how hard is it to go smart when you can buy a smart bulb from your local hardware store, plug it in, connect to the app and let your voice do what your fingers used to do on the light switch?

In theory, yes. The Hue line, from Philips, is the most popular, but they come with a catch: You need to plug a hub into a router, which you may or not have room for.

The benefit of a hub is that it can do more elaborate setups, like mood lighting on movie night in the living room. The downside is that it's yet another product asking to take up valuable real estate on your electrical strips. The plug on the Philips hub the company sent for review is so big it took up two spots on a six plug strip, and it also had to be connected physically to the router. Do you have an open slot in your router to add the hub?

The Lixx bulb sells for just over \$20 and is advertised as "no hub required." It can be turned on and off and dimmed, with just white light. A comparable light that changes colors will cost you an extra \$60, at \$79.99

Smart TVs and Streaming

Many smart TVs now support voice commands from Google (Android TV) and Alexa (the Fire TV Edition from Toshiba and Insignia), and

there are products that can bring voice to the "dumb" TV. Amazon's new Fire TV Blaster (\$35) does just that, by plugging directly into the TV, and Amazon's Fire TV streaming sticks (starting at around \$25) offer [voice commands](#) via the remote control.

What you need in a smart doorbell

Ring, which is owned by Amazon, is the most visible maker of doorbells, whose appeal is showing you who's at the door without you having to open it up. You can check on an app, or on a video display device like Amazon's Echo Show or Google's Nest Hub Max. Rivals have pushed through copycats, like the \$99 Remobell from Remo, which offers free cloud storage of the generated video from the doorbell. Ring charges \$30 yearly for the same service.

Ring has come under fire from privacy groups for having a product that's easy to hack. Recently, a family in Mississippi claimed a hacker gained access to a Ring camera placed in their 8-year-old daughter's room and started talking to her. Ring says customers need to be more vigilant about having strong passwords for both the device and the home network.

Smart doorbell alternatives

And what if you like the idea of a doorbell that can answer from anywhere, but don't need the video? Arlo, a brand from router company Netgear, offers the Audio Doorbell for \$56, which is \$43 cheaper than the entry-level Ring product. However, it doesn't work unless you pair it with a Basestation from Arlo that will set you back another \$70.

But if you're looking to buy some security cameras from the company, the Base station will run all of them.

Some of the more elaborate doorbells require wiring knowledge. If that's beyond you, tech support sites like Best Buy's Geek Squad and HelloTech will come to you and do the job.

Options for security cameras

These are simple to set up. Plug in and connect to Wi-Fi, unless you buy a battery-powered version, which won't require an outlet.

An outdoor setup from Blink, the XT2, sells for \$184 for three cameras, while an indoor camera from Wyze for watching the pets, kids or whatever else is happening inside, is \$24.49. Wyze will record your video for free and store it for 14 days. Ring's indoor cam charges \$3 monthly to record the action, and unlike Wyze, works only with Alexa, not the Google Assistant.

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