

Big tech show, now virtual, aims for digital connections

8 January 2021, by Rob Lever



The Consumer Electronics Show will be held in digital format after the pandemic forced organizers to cancel the annual technology extravaganza in Las Vegas

Forced by the pandemic to go online, the massive annual gathering for the technology industry normally held in Las Vegas still wants to be a place for connections, even if virtual.

The scaled-down, digital-only Consumer Electronics Show will be heavily influenced by the [global crisis](#), and will showcase new ways of delivering [health care](#) along with innovations in artificial intelligence, robotics, smart homes and cities, and other segments.

The January 11-14 event will go on without the glitzy spectacles and showy product unveilings which have in past years drawn tens of thousands of industry participants.

"We've been forced to adapt and we have," said Gary Shapiro, president of the Consumer Technology Association, which produces the show, adding that the new format "will illustrate how innovation paves the way for a brighter tomorrow."

The digital show may allow exhibitors, buyers and others to make better use of their time by connecting with the most relevant people, said Jean Foster, a senior vice president of the trade association.

"So we really built around the concept of people being able to interact with each other," she told AFP.

Generating buzz

Some unveilings which would normally draw crowds in Las Vegas are going ahead in the virtual space: Audi is set to launch its electric sports car, and LG will show off a large bendable display for gamers; other companies will be releasing gadgets adapted to superfast 5G wireless networks which are gaining traction.

But some analysts say the lack of in-person events has pushed many participants to the sidelines.



Internet personality Justine Ezarik will be one of the "anchors" of the online Consumer Electronics Show being held January 11-15, after organizers were forced to cancel the Las Vegas show which normally draws tens of thousands

"You're not going to find cool things by stumbling on them," said Bob O'Donnell, analyst and consultant with Technalysis Research.

O'Donnell said companies looking to generate interest might wait or hold their own digital event to avoid getting lost in the mass of online presentations at the digital CES.

Large multinational firms are likely to generate some buzz, according to O'Donnell, but "small companies will suffer the most in this format."

Shapiro said organizers are evaluating the show for 2022 which will be digital in part "but we also plan to be physical in Las Vegas."

The all-digital CES had some 1,800 exhibitors registered by the end of December, down from 4,400 last year, and will also include an expanded lineup of keynote speeches from industry leaders and panel discussions about evolving lifestyles and technology.

An "anchor desk" with notable personalities will help steer people to key events and products.

Tech vs pandemic

O'Donnell said CES is important because it showcases technology people have been using to get through the coronavirus pandemic.

"People have used technology to figure out ways to do things in ways they never thought would be possible before the pandemic," O'Donnell said.



Verizon Communications CEO Hans Vestberg will be delivering the kickoff keynote for the 2021 Consumer Electronics Show, being held entirely online this year

The pandemic has shined a spotlight on digital health innovations including telehealth and remote patient monitoring, in high demand with people reluctant or unable to visit their doctors.

But it has also highlighted growing interest in remote learning, streaming media and gaming for people stuck at home during the global health crisis.

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"People are spending more time and money for things around the house," O'Donnell said, underscoring interest in connected exercise equipment and home appliances, for example.

Robin Murdoch, global software and platform leader for Accenture, said a major takeaway from the 2020 pandemic was that "the technology worked.— our digital lives were enabled by social networks and cloud platforms."

Murdoch said the annual show is a key moment because it underscores the importance of technology for so many industries from automotive to health to consumer products.

"The show represents the convergence of industries," he said. "CES demonstrates the fact that technology now underpins all industries."

Some of the products to be unveiled at the online show include wearables to keep track of medical conditions and other kinds of remote monitoring.

"Seniors are becoming increasingly isolated, whether living at home, in nursing facilities, or in assisted living communities—often a result of physical distancing during COVID," said Arthur Jue of the startup LiveFreely, which is showing its Buddy personal assistant app for Fitbit devices to allow families to keep tabs on seniors.

The show is also highlighting the need for new technologies to help people get care and share medical information, noted Bettina Experton, chief executive of the health technology firm Humetrix.

"The pandemic brings to light the need to have critical information at your fingertips whether you are a consumer or a public health organization," said Experton, whose firm will be showcasing at CES its applications that help manage health records and track risks from COVID-19 and other conditions.

APA citation: Big tech show, now virtual, aims for digital connections (2021, January 8) retrieved 5 December 2022 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2021-01-big-tech-virtual-aims-digital.html>

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