

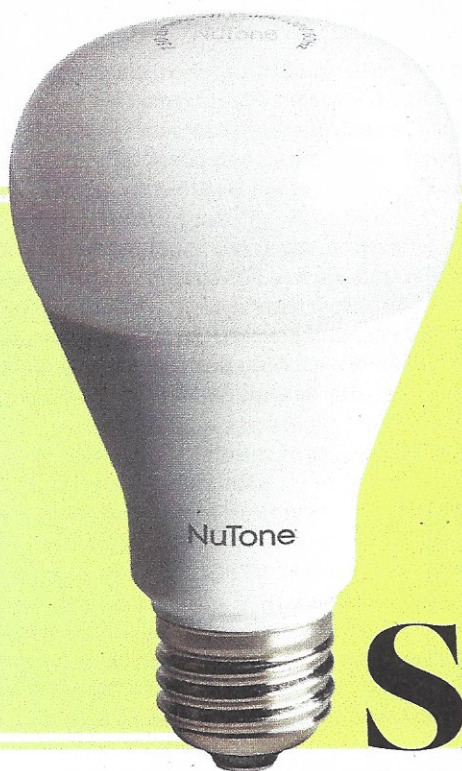
remodeling

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As options increase and technology improves, it's time for remodelers to start paying attention to the connected home

BY LAURA MCNULTY

Smart Tech SPOTLIGHT

It's no secret that today's homeowners, with more information at their fingertips than ever before, are more discerning—and perhaps more demanding—when it comes to their homes. They want products that perform well and look great, with a long, low-maintenance lifespan to boot. And by and large, they're willing to spend more for premium quality. As technology advances, the question remains: Does that desire for the best of the best extend to the smart home?

Manufacturers and pros in the electronics industry certainly seem to think so. The past several years have seen a plethora of new product introductions with connected capabilities, from one-off additions like a smart lock to systems designed to automate control of the entire home. But many remodelers interviewed for this article indicated that so far, their customers aren't pushing for the technology.

So why should remodelers care? For starters, consider this stat from a January survey of 1,000 consumers by PricewaterhouseCoopers: While only 26% of respondents currently own a smart home device, 65% feel excited about the future of the technology, and 43% are planning or considering a future purchase. And in a survey conducted by Houzz in collaboration with the industry

group CEDIA in September 2016, which polled nearly 1,000 homeowners who are planning, in the middle of, or recently completed a home renovation project, almost half (45%) said they were installing smart devices.

The technology hasn't reached peak market saturation yet, but the sooner that remodelers start to familiarize themselves with these products and their capabilities, the better positioned they'll be to serve their clients in the future.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

So far, mainstream consumer demand is concentrated in a few, easily adapted areas: security, in the form of smart locks, doorbells, and cameras; and HVAC, most notably through smart thermostats like Nest, says Dave Pedigo, vice president of emerging technologies at CEDIA. "In general, people are looking for security and comfort," he explains.

Jack Cutts, director of industry and business intelligence at the Consumer Technology Association (CTA), has seen a similar pattern. He names smart security systems and connected thermostats as the fastest growing segments in the marketplace.

However, one major game-changer right now is the rise of

digital home assistants and voice-activated technology, such as Amazon's Alexa and the new Google Home. "The biggest thing we saw this year at CES [the International Consumer Electronics Show] is the proliferation of integration with Amazon's Echo device," says Cutts.

That explosion of available integrations lends itself to consumers looking to expand their smart home capabilities, Cutts says. Of those expansions, both he and Pedigo name smart lighting and switches as an area to watch due to the convenience—and potential energy savings—of being able to turn these systems on and off remotely.

Security and HVAC companies aren't the only ones making moves in the connected home market, however. Appliance manufacturers are getting in the game, too, with recent introductions ranging from a new suite of connected appliances from Bosch to a Nest-integrated refrigerator and wall oven from Whirlpool Corp.

So far, it's difficult to say if these sorts of products have had much traction in the consumer market. The relative infrequency and higher cost of appliance purchases in general makes their adoption slower by necessity, says Cutts.

"[Appliances] are really nascent at this point," adds Pedigo. "You look at the connected fridge and you say, 'Well, what does a connected fridge do for me?' ... [Then] I'm at the grocery store and no one is home to tell me if I have milk in the fridge, and I'm like, 'Oh, how handy would that be for me to be able to instantaneously look at and see what the inventory of my refrigerator is while I'm at the grocery store?'"

As consumers become more familiar with the technology and its uses, and as it improves and proliferates into lower-priced models, adoption rates will likely increase, Cutts says. "In vehicles, we used to see high-end electronics only in the high-end models, and that has moved down. Now it's all the way down in the entry-level products," he adds. "I don't see any reason why the same dynamic wouldn't play out with smart [appliances]."

MOVING AHEAD

Given the early days of the technology and the DIY appeal of many devices, remodelers may think that they don't need to pay attention. But as usage is forecast to increase, waiting until your customers are ahead of you on the curve may lead to scrambling to catch up. What makes it especially crucial that remodelers get ahead of the game is that providing a quality experience for the homeowner requires more than installing a few disparate products and calling it a day.

"Right now there's a lot of confusion in the marketplace," says Pedigo. "You would think that one device or another should automatically work together, and they just don't." He recommends partnering with a home tech specialist to ensure a smart home system is well implemented for clients (see sidebar, page 32).

One reason to consult with a pro is to gain insight into the more technical aspects of smart home installation that aren't as exciting as the latest gadget, but are indispensable to making sure the system works properly—namely, ensuring a home's network is sufficiently secured and properly configured to handle the system's demands.



Now You're Cooking

Whirlpool's French Door refrigerator (top) integrates with Nest to allow for remote control of smart features. And through Bosch's new Home Connect suite (bottom), users can control appliances like wall ovens, dishwashers, and built-in coffee makers through its corresponding app.

For more product info, please go to <http://go.hw.net/rm2017>

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PRODUCTS



Practical Magic
Homeowners seeking improved security have numerous options, such as August's suite of smart locks, keypads, and doorbell cams (top) and Nest's HD indoor and outdoor security cams (bottom).

Pedigo stresses the importance of installing a high-quality network that can handle the high amounts of data being transferred on a daily basis; a standard wireless router likely won't cut it. "I always use the analogy of a clothes line: If you put a shirt or two on a clothes line, it holds up just fine. If you start putting a whole ton of clothes on there, that line starts to sag."

Another capability that will assist in setting up capable home networks is WiFi mesh networking, says Cutts, which allows users to install additional wireless modules in areas of their home where the WiFi signal is weakest. "It's an expandable system, and it would automatically help those modules communicate with each other and fill in all those dead spots," he says. This is especially important if homeowners have smart products on the exterior of their homes, where connectivity typically begins to drop.

"A smart home is great, but if you don't have coverage for all of your connected [devices], then you're only getting a partial benefit," Cutts says.

And as with any other product that remodelers install, a positive user experience is the most important element. "You want to make sure that with whatever system [you use], number one, it should be reliable. Number two, it should be easy to use," Pedigo says. "And then if it's kind of cool, then that's your third ingredient."

A Pro's Tech Tips

Insight on the connected home market from Rob Dzedzy, founder of West Chester, Pa.-based home technology design and installation firm Media Rooms.

Q: What sort of smart home technology are you seeing the most interest in from consumers?

A: Smart home technology is becoming more popular because of products like Alexa and Google Home. However, we have been installing home automation for well over 20 years. ... Clients want the ability to adjust their thermostats from wherever they are, or the ability to unlock a door when the plumber shows up an hour early. The main requests we see are lighting control, motorized window treatments, and HVAC control. The two main benefits are energy savings and security. A third is convenience.

Q: What are some of the most common misconceptions remodelers have?

A: Everyone has a misconception that all devices work together seamlessly. There are several different types of connectivity, such as WiFi, ZigBee, Z-wave, Bluetooth, etc. Devices need to be using the same communication protocol to work together.

Q: What advice would you give to those who aren't sure where to start?

A: I advise remodelers to partner with a home technology professional. The smart home technology changes and advances rapidly, so having a trade partner that can guide the remodeler through the details will be a win-win.

Q: How will remodelers benefit from offering smart technology?

A: Remodelers who understand the importance of a connected home will be in a better position to engage a tech-savvy client. We will see more and more connected devices in homes over the next few years.