

Comfortable connections:

Reviews of Three Cool Gadgets That Simplify the Hassle of Setting Up and Integrating All your Modern Home Electronics

By Eyal Goldshmid

Has this ever happened to you?

You get your hands on the latest high-end gadget -- the newest Blu-ray disc player, OLED television, DTS-ES Matrix sound system or Vista-ready PC -- bring it home, ready to play with it for hours, lips smacking with anticipation.

Only once it's been set up, you feel suddenly lost. There are wires everywhere. The remote has more buttons than mission control. The manual is thicker than a dictionary.

So much for streamlined technology, right?

Not anymore. Some newly available products have taken the "higher learning" element out of the electronics equation, allowing you to enjoy their advancements easily and without confusion or questions.

Setting up the new **HP TouchSmart PC** (\$1799), the world's first touch-screen computer based on Windows' new Vista operating system, involves only one cable -- the power plug. And operation couldn't be simpler.

As the product's name suggests, the TouchSmart doesn't require a mouse or keyboard for operation (though it comes with wireless versions of both, in case you need them). Instead, you interact with the system via a unique touch-enabled 19" diagonal widescreen BrightView LCD monitor. Just tap a spot on the screen and off you go.

Though it seems deceptively simple, the TouchSmart doesn't skimp on capabilities either. The CPU contains all the functions you'd expect from a regular PC, including document creation, wireless internet connection and video conferencing, among others. (A 1.3 mega-pixel webcam and microphone are built into the unit for easy access to video chats and the like. No need to attach any peripherals.)

However this isn't a computer made for everyday computing. Rather, it's been designed to become an integral part of your household routine.

To maximize the PC's sensor-based capabilities, HP has included the nifty HP SmartCalendar program, which lets you create schedules and reminders. A handy stylus pen tool, included in the package, can be used to leave hand-written messages to family members or create lists sans the keyboard.

Just as impressive are its multimedia capabilities, which turn the system into an interactive entertainment center. The built-in TV tuner, coaxial jack and A/V connections offer easy hook up to your home entertainment components and cable or satellite services, which in turn allow you listen to music, burn and play DVDs and CDs, or watch television and movies. Thanks to Windows Media Center, which comes pre-installed, you can also turn the TouchSmart into a fully functional DVR system (with a roomy 320GB of hard disk space for storage). Though it can't play Blu-Ray discs at the moment, the CPU can record and playback HD-quality programs with ease.

If digital photos are more your speed, consider docking an HP A510 or A610 model photo printer (sold separately) into the back of the CPU and turn the TouchSmart into your own photo kiosk, complete with on-the-spot printing.

“We think of it as walk-up computer. It’s designed for quick access to information,” says Maureen Kelly, Senior Product Marketing Manager for HP’s Consumer Desktop Business division. “It’s very simple and graphically very rich, with big beautiful icons. It’s a great visual experience. It’s cool. We definitely think it appeals to a more affluent consumer. It has a gorgeous display and we’ve included a lot of high-end features.”

**Phillips’ Pronto Smart Remote Home Remote Panel TSU9600** (\$1299) adapts a similar touch-screen mindset to the remote control.

Here, instead of using a plethora of buttons and knobs, you can control every piece of electronic equipment in your entertainment room through a 3.7-inch VGA touch-screen interface. The product’s pre-programmed library -- the largest available in any remote -- ensures the unit can communicate with every component in your collection; if, per chance, it can’t work with a specific brand, the remote will actually learn to do so.

But controlling components offers just a fraction of what this remote can do. Thanks to its Lutron RadioRA controls (a new addition from previous models), you can use the item to adjust lighting in your entertainment room, allowing the creation of a variety of ambient mood effects. Looking for some romantic lighting for a quiet evening, or some quick-change effects for a party? Just hit a button and the remote will do the work for you. It comes with 50 pre-set moods, as well as memory for many individualized settings.

It’s reliance on Escient Fireball Media Servers allows you to control components all over the house -- a significant advantage for those with multi-room speaker installations, stereo cabinets and more. The Escience feature also operates an online music server that, using your WI-FI connection, can stream music into the various rooms of your house, creating the perfect party atmosphere.

“The connected, digital home is the future and this furthers the goal of living effortlessly and through technology,” said Phillips representative Andy Wakefield.

**Honeywell’s FutureSmart System** (prices start at \$7,500) takes that same concept as the Pronto and expands its capabilities exponentially, allowing for complete control of all electronic components in your house. This includes everything from your A/V components to your computer equipment -- even your kitchen appliances.

If that weren’t enough, new advances to Honeywell’s technology have implemented voice control into these features. So if one night you want to watch a specific movie, simply speak the command to your home. The movie will start playing seconds later. The lights will turn down to enhance the mood. Even popcorn can start popping in your microwave. What could be easier?

Of course, all of this requires some significant preparation. Unlike the Pronto, which works via your internet connection, FutureSmart demands you install an intricate web of wires throughout your home -- essentially connecting everything under the roof in a single “network.” Once set up, the service lets you to access all its features from anywhere in the home. Watch DVDs or cable and satellite from any TV. Access the internet in any room from any selected device.

Because of Honeywell’s security system origins, FutureSmart also allows you to use any connected TV as a security monitor or video intercom. That means that if you’re watching TV and hear the doorbell ring, you can switch your display to see who’s at the door with just a push of a button.

"Once installed, a homeowner can turn on the lights by simply saying, 'Rosie, turn on the lights,'" says Tim Trautman, senior product manager for Honeywell. "Users can even create a

series of scheduled events by using detailed commands, such as, 'every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at sunset, turn on the front door lights for five hours.'