

Consumer Electronics Show 2014: A Few Observations

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As part of my annual coverage of the Consumer Electronics Show, here are some initial reactions. From all over the world 150,000 people descended into Las Vegas to check out each other's wares.

If there was one product that was most ubiquitous it would be tablets. Many many manufacturers are coming to the market with a tablet or a tablet accessory; almost every 4th or 5th booth seems to be leveraging the growing prevalence of tablets. Manufacturers included **LG** and **Polaroid**, and we'll be reviewing some of these in forthcoming installments. Tablet cases, portfolios and keyboards were also in abundant supply.

Next up in ubiquity were the various solutions for keeping these tablets charged and ready to go. Enhancing battery performance applies to mobile phones as well as tablets. There are a growing number of battery pack outboard units that can be quickly tethered to the mobile device (tablet or phone) to recharge the battery when a wall plug is unavailable. There are also various interesting hand crank and several solar-based recharging devices on display.

The most expensive item I spent time with was **Kaleidescape**. As with most new technologies, Hollywood is slowly coming around to the premise of this innovative device. Costing almost \$4000, it is a means by which you can go deep into your video collection (which gives a hint about the name of the product). For instance, you can bookmark certain movie scenes for quick access. Your films appear on a home screen and when one is chosen, all the films in relative stylistic proximity shuffle on the screen to appear nearby. Currently only offering Warner Brothers and Lionsgate films, there are nonetheless myriad titles from which to choose, currently about 4600 in number. Warner Brothers, with the largest library of titles in Hollywood, is clearly forward-leaning in licensing titles to Kaleidescape. With the deceleration in physical format (DVD and Blu Ray) sales, electronic sell through has been inching upward, but not as quickly as streaming (via such services as Netflix, Amazon, etc). Far fewer dollars flow to the rightsholders from streaming on a per title basis, but the quantity of titles streamed by consumers is ever on the rise. Studios would prefer sell through, either in physical or electronic format, and so it remains one of the conundrums of Hollywood as to why so few studios have signed up with Kaleidescape. With an incredibly elegant interface and impressive depth of detail, the Kaleidescape platform offers the well-heeled film buff an amazing experience.

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One of the most brilliant products I saw sells from the \$89 and seems to solve the parental nightmare of teenagers driving while texting, or for that matter anyone driving while texting. The three part solution from Cellcontrol is a piece of hardware that fits into the car, an application that is loaded into each phone to be under the control of the device and a website console for the parents to calibrate the driver's phone usage. The method by which the phone is rendered inoperable is via an electronic array. The owners of Cellcontrol have seemingly figured out all possible workarounds, including the possibility of the driver holding the phone with an extended arm outside the driver seat area in hopes of using it. The parent can control for how long after the phone leaves the driver seat area until it becomes operable again. Further, operable is a relative term. The parent can whitelist numbers that will come through while the driver has his phone, such that the parents could make a phone call for Bluetooth reception, which is legal and safer. This is one product that I expect will begin to gain traction (pun intended) as it becomes more known by concerned parents. I will be roadtesting this device soon.



Cellcontrol sends an array of signals that blocks the use of the driver's mobile phone.

Further on the mobility front, many companies are addressing the vulnerability of these products to wear and tear. By now, everyone has a case or cover for their smartphone. One of the coolest I have been using is from **Evutec**. By blending high tech substances with organic materials, I am pleased to helping on the sustainability front and protecting my phone. I particularly like their bamboo-colored unit, which features multiple layers of real wood veneer infused with DuPont™ Kevlar® outer shell protection.



Americans have spent almost \$6 billion on repairing their smartphones. My daughters have contributed to the Apple stock price, by purchasing replacement iPhones that have been cracked. Some companies of course provide simple screen protectors, but others go much further. I saw several companies that work with phone manufacturers to apply a repellent which allows the phone to be rendered safe for up to 3 hours at 1 meter underwater. Other products apply a skin to the face of the phone, which will apparently render any significant impact ineffective. For instance, the **ScreenGuardz** Pure Premium Glass Screen Protector (\$39.95) can withstand the damage of nails, a hammer, box cutters and my daughters. As to their stick price, many observers believe Apple has begun to hit a plateau with its iPhones; several folks have noted that when the only innovation is a choice of colors, you know things are slowing down.

The high price of smartphones is being slowly addressed by various manufacturers, most of them Asian, who are proposing to bring in lower cost unlocked smartphones. This would be closer to the business model outside of America, where consumers purchase the phone independent of their carrier and select service afterwards.

The question remains unanswered as to why there is no app approved by the carriers which would turn a stolen or lost phone into a paper weight. Certainly there exists the economic incentive, as people who lose their phone remain willing to pay for a replacement. I would expect this to be resolved via consumer demand or legislative fiat in short order.

A few final observations. The competition among flat panel TV manufacturers continues. Although the size race seems to have stabilized, the attention is now being paid to ultra high definition. **RCA** has a model that is far more affordable than the **Sony** equivalent. As always, new technologies such as Ultra HD will not take off until content is made available by the studios and networks. Headphones continue to be a burgeoning category, with an increasing number of brands hoping to take a slice of the incredible market share garnered by **Beats**.

Every year at CES brings new developments, which brings to mind the possibly apocryphal but amusing quote from Charles H. Duell. As Commissioner of the US Patent Office, he was alleged to have said in 1899 that "everything that can be invented has been invented."

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