CES 2012 Preview: The 5 Trends to Watch Most Closely

The Nokia Lumia Windows Phone series will be updated by a chart-topping 900 version at CES.

A serene moment from CES 2011. It surely did not last long.

With 140,000 attendees clogging 1.7 million square feet of floor space, next week's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas won't merely be "some big trade show." No, CES is also The Big Show — the grand coming-out party for every hardware manufacturer that wants to prove its gadget is the single must-see spectacle for which all other booth visits must be cancelled.

But there will be about 2,700 exhibitors at CES next week. No single attendee can pay attention to every booth. Nor should anyone feel this is necessary, as most CES product demos don't warrant much attention.

CES relevance is waning. Smartphone announcements (always high on our radar) already dribble out throughout the year, and the Mobile World Congress and CTIA trade shows play host to many phone launches as well. Apple, of course, hosts its own product events, demonstrating that you don't need a trade show to create a huge splash. And Google, Amazon and Facebook — just as relevant to consumer tech as any hardware company — run their own events as well.

But enough cynicism. Just because CES isn't the show it used to be doesn't mean it's not still packed with interesting gear. You just need to focus on the truly interesting product trends, and filter out the background noise.

Gadget Lab is here to help.

I give you five product trends that our reporters will be following when we hit the ground in Las Vegas next Sunday morning. Product previews and press announcements begin Sunday afternoon, and continue through Tuesday morning when the show actually begins.

Microsoft’s Bid For Relevance

The Lumia 800 Windows Phone should be updated with a 900 version at CES.

Microsoft has announced it’s bowing out of next year’s show — making CES 2012 its final appearance. So the pressure is on for Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer to deliver a commanding CES keynote, a piece of theater that assures the world that Microsoft remains relevant in a world dominated by Apple and Android headlines.

To this end, we should expect key Microsoft announcements (or at least demos) in the mobile space. Microsoft has already demo’d a Windows 8 tablet at Gadget Lab, and if we don’t see more of Windows 8 — running on tablets, not notebooks — we’ll have to assign Redmond a demerit. It’s probably too soon for specific hardware partners to show off OEM-branded Windows 8 tablets, but I would expect to see Windows 8 tablet *reference designs* somewhere on the show floor.

We’ll be seeing more Windows Phone handsets too. Nokia is now Microsoft’s new best friend in the smartphone space, ditching the Symbian OS for Windows Phone OS. Next week, we’ll likely see a new Nokia flagship phone, probably called the Lumia 900, or Nokia Ace, replete with a larger screen than Nokia’s current Windows Phone offerings. We might also see Windows Phone handsets from HTC and Samsung.

Its CES road show notwithstanding, 2012 is a pivotal year for Microsoft. It’s committing big-time to Windows 8 and Windows Phone, two critical initiatives intended to dispel that stinging diss, “Oh, Microsoft. They make PC software, don’t they?”

Now, whether Steve Ballmer can deliver the presentation of his life at the CES keynote Monday night, that’s another matter entirely. But we’ll be on hand to report his words, and grade his performance.

Ultrabooks
The Toshiba Portege Z835 was one of a few ultrabooks that arrived in 2011.

Should super-slim, super-light notebooks really be called “ultrabooks”? Why can’t we just call them “better notebooks”? Simple: Because Intel is behind the initiative to prop up competitors to the MacBook Air, and the company has trademarked the term ultrabook to create buzz around what is emerging to be a very compelling (though quite expensive) new product category.

To qualify as an ultrabook in Intel parlance, a notebook must not only be thin and light, but also boot up near instantaneously, much like a tablet. And to do this, the device must be stocked with a solid state drive, or SSD. All that solid-state memory costs a lot, and this is just one contributor to high ultrabook prices.

Regardless, even amid our troubled economic times, the PC industry has telegraphed that it will be going ultrabook crazy in Las Vegas next week. As we reported Wednesday, all the major PC manufacturers — including Dell, HP, Toshiba, Acer, Asus and Lenovo — will be showing off new ultrabooks at CES. When all the dust settles, as many as 50 new models might be announced.

We just saw one of next week’s unveilings in the Wired office, in fact. We can’t betray any details, but I can tell you that interesting new materials are entering the premium notebook space, and that while prices will remain high, at least your ultrabook will exude panache.

I never thought I’d ever get “excited” about a notebook, but ultrabooks really *are* lustworthy kit. Indeed, once you’ve lived (and traveled) with an ultrabook or MacBook Air for a few days, you won’t want to return to that heavy brick of a notebook you’ve merely been *tolerating* for so long.

Tablets

The Toshiba Thrive Android tablet was demoed at CES 2011.

CES 2011 was the grand Android tablet coming-out party. That's where we saw prototypes of the Motorola Xoom and Toshiba Thrive. That's where all the buzz around 10.1-inch, Honeycomb-based tablets took root. Of course, the buzz morphed into buzzkill as the year wore on, and it became clear that these iPad competitors were over-priced and under-wowing.

But that doesn't mean CES 2012 doesn't offer great opportunity for a concerted tablet re-set. Acer, Lenovo, Toshiba and ViewSonic all have tablets on deck for Las Vegas.

Nvidia has already announced quad-core Tegra 3 processors, and we'll be flattened if we don't see these chips in a bunch of new tablets at CES this year; Asus already has a quad-core tablet, and Acer is right on its tail. With greater processor power comes zippier interface swiping, quicker multitasking, better video playback, and more visually intense 3D gaming.

We also expect to see at least a handful of tablets running Ice Cream Sandwich (ICS), Google latest Android OS. These devices need to make a big CES appearance after all the hoopla Google has made about ICS throughout the year. Not only does ICS look fantastic, it adds scads of useful, clever features to the Android repertoire. But, perhaps most importantly, ICS is what Google and its hardware partners need to wash away consumers' bitter memories of 2011's Android tablets.

Or the hardware industry could just go cheap. Indeed, the Kindle Fire has taught us that non-nerd consumers will buy tablets if they're priced low enough. So in addition to all the quad-core and ICS action, we'll also be on a CES scavenger hunt for cheaper, smaller tablets in the 7- and 8-inch range.

But you know what? I'd personally trade in all of the above for a single Windows 8 tablet announcement — complete with final specs, and something I could spot-test with my own hands.

Connectedness — In Appliances, Cars and Fitness Gear

LG's connected fridge has already won a CES Innovations award for its blast chiller feature.

Don’t snicker, but home appliances, cars, and fitness equipment could be the most interesting hardware to emerge at this year’s show. All of these ostensibly utilitarian product categories are being enhanced with features that provide direct connectivity with mobile devices, if not also online services via the cloud.

LG will be back this year with even more advanced “connected appliances” — refrigerators, dishwashers, clothes washers, floor cleaning robots and other household staples that boast slick touch screen interfaces, and direct connectivity with smartphones and computers. Samsung makes connected appliances as well, but LG is a leader in this arena, and will be showing off higher levels of device-to-device connectivity for its ThinkQ line of smart appliances.

Using LG’s technology, you can enlist a smart phone app to adjust appliance settings, monitor energy consumption, and even set up a service call. But what we really want to see from LG is its ultra-high-capacity fridge that includes a “blast chiller” capable of cooling a beer or can of soda in less than five minutes.

Connected cars will also be a big theme at CES 2012. Ford, Chrysler, GM, Mercedes-Benz, Audi and Kia are all signed up for the show floor, and should be demoing new features that deliver digital connectivity to their automobiles, including better interfacing between car dashboards and smartphones. Expect to see novel new safety systems, streaming music services like Pandora, and hand-free, voice-activated texting like what’s being currently hyped in the Hyundai Veloster.

Fitness gadgets will round out the connectedness theme. At CES this year, various

Gadget Lab reporters will be wearing Fitbit step trackers to monitor how many miles they walk (check @gadgetlab for daily updates!), and we expect to see a new Fitbit lifestyle product that directly connects to these handheld widgets, providing even deeper levels of health information.

We’re also curious to see a wristband called Basis that marries pedometer functions to a heart rate monitor — with full reports back to your computer.

The Next Generation of TV

LG's 84-inch TV quadruples typical HD screen resolution.

Yeah, we know that if any tech category is going to burn the hopeful, optimistic CES watcher, it’s going to be television. As we reported Thursday, 3D TV was all the rage at CES 2010 and 2011, but never caught on with consumers. And then we have the problem of “prototype prestidigitation”: Amazing floor demos that stoke our excitement, but are more or less magic, years away from retail readiness. Indeed, if you want to see a one-off TV that looks like it time-traveled from 2020, head straight to the CES pavilions of LG, Samsung and Panosonic.

But while you should approach TV demos at CES with a healthy amount of caution, don’t write off the razzle-dazzle entirely. Today’s one-offs and prototypes might not be shipping tomorrow, but they indicate various *directions* in which TV is moving. Even 3D, while not a consumer must-have, will become just another spec box check-off item in a few years time.

So what kind of boob-tube magic is on deck for 2012? LG has already telegraphed two potentially amazing spectacles: an 84-inch, 3840×2160 behemoth that offers four times the resolution of current HD, and a 55-inch OLED TV that’s just 0.16-inches deep. Less amazing from LG? A TV loaded with version two of Google TV, the stumbly-but-getting-better smart TV platform that we first saw in October. And it looks like Samsung, too, will be doing Google TV as well.

And herein lies, perhaps, the biggest CES trend of all — your meta trend: Gadget hardware is becoming less relevant, while gadget *interfaces* (like smart TVs and the apps that run on top of them) are moving to the fore. Everyone wants a TV with a

super-large screen, sure, but the smart apps and video-on-demand services that *run* on the TV — Netflix, Hulu, Facebook, Pandora, and so on — are beginning to matter even more.

All that, plus we want to control our TVs — nay, *all* our gadgets, tools and appliances — with our smartphones, verbal commands, and even Kinect-style hand gestures. Apps and interface design should be a big theme at CES next week. We'll see significant changes in the screens of our TVs, appliances, cars, exercise equipment and more. So set your browser to Gadget Lab for updates and analysis of the coolest innovations.

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