

CES: what would blow your mind — brain-zapping headset or smart kettle?

Tim Bradshaw



The annual Consumer Electronics Show can be an exhausting, nerve-jangling affair. So after two days of pounding the Las Vegas pavements, I took up an offer I might otherwise have thought better of.

Mind-boggling headset

A three-year-old start-up called **Thync** wanted to strap a prototype of its brain-zapping headset to my temples, with the intention of altering my mood. As wearable devices go, it sounded a refreshing change from another jumped-up pedometer.

I arrived flustered and late at the high-floor suite, after running from a meeting across town. Some time later, I left feeling mellow and unruffled.

Whether that was due to 15 minutes wearing Thync's headset or just the calm of sitting down and staring out at the Nevada mountains, I cannot say. But it definitely felt as if electricity flowed into my head during that time – I could feel it all too acutely when I turned the power up on the iPhone app that controls the Thync.

For the first 13 minutes of my Thync initiation session, after fiddling with the levels, I was sceptical that this was any more use than aromatherapy – that is, not much. But in the last two minutes, my eyelids and head became heavier, as though I had just had a massage or a glass of wine after a long day. The relaxed feeling lingered for around an hour.

Thync’s pitch is that it can “merge technology with biology”, and stimulate specific neural pathways to affect mood. As well as a calming zap, it offers a caffeine-level hit of energy, which I did not try. The company says the headset can be safely used several times a day, and has conducted trials on 3,000 people over 18 months. It is working with the Food and Drug Administration to ensure its safety.

The electrical-pulsing headset will go on sale this year for an unspecified sum in the hundreds of dollars. I would prefer to give Thync a more thorough testing before recommending it, but it was certainly one of my more distinctive CES experiences in a week otherwise lacking in surprises.

Making sense of the sensors

Wearables, smarthomes, automotive technology, ultra-high-definition televisions – the roster of devices at CES was well trailed, yet none really stood out. Yes, Sony’s \$1,000 4K **Handycam AX33**, above, was impressive, at a time when 4K TVs – that’s four times the resolution of current HD – are starting to look more affordable. And yes, Samsung’s washing machines with an integrated bowl for handwashing or soaking are a novel idea. But you know pickings are slim when you are praising innovative toppers.

Amid all the hyperbole about the “internet of things”, CES 2015 highlights two emerging themes. One is that the more mundane innovations – checking via an app that you turned the oven off or that the dog is OK via a pet-friendly webcam – are actually the best applications for the coming ubiquity of sensors and online connections. As Tom Coates, a San Francisco tech entrepreneur, put it to me this week: “They get 5-20 per cent better. That’s it. It’s not revolutionary.”



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Always particularly satisfying to wear a fitness tracker at CES. Today's step count: too bloody many.

<http://t.co/KTUMV6SOPB>



The second is that many of the new devices are niche gadgets that will be vital to only a small number of people. The internet of things may never have an iPhone moment.

Some of the best ideas I saw at CES were not from the big



manufacturers but from start-ups, such as **Blast Motion**, left, which makes sensors that measure movement on sports equipment such as golf clubs and baseball bats, or gardening assistants from **Parrot** and **Edyn** whose sensors remotely measure soil to detect when plants need attention. **Smarter's** kettles, left, can be turned on remotely by an app to get your cup of tea under way in good time, while **LeakSmart** detects leaky water pipes and shuts off the supply.



These, er, “internet things” are not as sexy as the **Hexo+ drone**, top, which can automatically follow a Bluetooth-tethered smartphone to film swooping, looping shots of a snowboarder, say, bombing down a mountain. They aren't as sophisticated as the **Myo** motion-sensing wristband, bottom left, which responds not only to waving an arm but also to tapping fingers or clenching fists, to control TVs, games, PowerPoint or even robots.

Nor can these internet-of-things things jump up, balance on one leg and recognise human emotions like Aldebaran's pint-sized humanoid robot, **Nao**, can.

The verdict

While all the drones and robots amazed and delighted me, I suspect that it is the everyday, less mind-blowing gadgets that will eventually bring the internet of things into our daily lives.

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