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Sci/Tech > Computers & Technology
from the May 15, 2006 edition



BACK AGAIN: Armin Ahmed exchanged one version of an Xbox game console for another last week at Best Buy in Watertown, Mass. 'I don't really understand this stuff,' he said. Manufacturers are looking for ways to simplify gadgets such as digital cameras (right).
JOHN NORDELL - STAFF

A fast rate of return

With half of today's gadgets brought back to stores in perfect working order, manufacturers are aiming to simplify.

By [Gregory M. Lamb](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

Trudy Schuett's top-of-the-line car stereo is so complicated that she hasn't figured out how to change the radio station. She only learned how to work the CD player when her minister, riding in the passenger seat, started pushing buttons and stumbled on the right combination. And forget setting the car clock - she has more important things to do than pull out the owner's manual and hunt for the instructions. She also has an MP3 player she doesn't use, and a digital camera that sits mostly idle because she has to relearn how it works each time she wants to use it.

"I am not an idiot or a technophobe," insists Mrs. Schuett, a resident of Yuma, Ariz., who says some of the useless gadgets belong to her husband or were given to her as gifts. "I have had a computer since the mid-'80s and have been online since 1995. I maintain and repair my own computer system."

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More and more, Americans are being caught in a dilemma: They love electronic gadgets with lots of bells and whistles. But they're also frustrated when they get their new toys home and find out they aren't easy to install or operate. Half the products returned to stores are in good working order, but customers can't figure out how they work, says a recent study conducted at the Technical University of Eindhoven in the Netherlands. On average, American consumers will try for just 20 minutes to get a new gadget to work before giving up, the study adds.

As a result, the world continues to be filled with poorly designed products, doomed to either gather dust in a bottom drawer or be returned to the store.

The problem only will worsen as technological change accelerates, some observers say. (Finally figured out your VCR? Here comes TiVo and Slingbox.) But manufacturers are beginning to see the importance of simplifying their products. In fact, nearly everyone gives lip service to simplicity: Praise is regularly heaped upon Apple's iPod, a model of clean design and ease of use, as well as the design of Google's home page (www.google.com), with its simple search box surrounded by just a few words.

In 2004, Philips Electronics introduced its "Sense and Simplicity" program to make its products more customer friendly. Philips found many devices had functions that consumers had difficulty installing or did not use. And some didn't communicate with each other, says Andre Manning, a spokesman for Philips Electronics North America in New York. One wireless music center, which controls audio speakers all over a house from a single location, was so hard to set up that even the company's own employees found it a challenge.

Today, Philips has released or is developing a number of products that reflect its new approach.

"Products that are technologically advanced should also be simple to use," Mr. Manning says. A new seven-inch-diagonal digital photo display, for example, stores 50 to 80 photos and



WHAT CAN'T IT DO?

Cellphones perform many functions today. Users are apt to return such gadgets if they are too complex, confusing.
 JOHN NORDELL - STAFF

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shows them in a simple slideshow format. It downloads photos directly from any digital camera or any brand of memory card or stick, or from any computer, making it easy to use. The picture quality is better than a typical video screen, the company says, rivaling that of a photo print.

On the Philips drawing boards is an even simpler design. "Momento," a glass ball, fits in the palm of the hand and "wakes up" to play its store of video clips when picked up. The user simply shakes the ball to see the next video. "Momento" has no buttons or dials and no wires to connect, receiving its images wirelessly from any Bluetooth-enabled device.

Caught between electronics manufacturers and consumers with high expectations are retailers. If buyers can't get products to work after they take them home, "retailers can end up with a problem because they don't want returns. That's very expensive," says Roland Rust, a professor of business and chairman of the marketing department at the University of Maryland in College Park.

The estimated value of returned products in the US is \$100 billion per year, according to referenceforbusiness.com - a website aimed at small businesses.

While "big box" mass retailers largely leave customers on their own, specialty electronics stores offer more help. At Best Buy, "blue shirt" sales associates explain what the products do and "Geek Squads" visit homes to set up computers or other complex devices. When an item is returned, customers are asked if they'd like help in learning how to operate the product rather than just returning it. "They bought the product for a purpose. If we get a chance to talk with them, they usually keep it," says Victor Martinez, a supervisor at the Best Buy store in Watertown, Mass.

For example, one of his customers thought that an MP3 player could be connected to a radio, Mr. Martinez says. After Martinez explained that MP3s download music from a computer, not a radio, and showed the customer how to do it, the customer kept the item and continues to shop at the store.

Gadgets became complicated in the first place because companies failed to learn that less is often more, Professor Rust says. "Feature creep" or "feature bloat" has become common because microprocessors allow the addition of more functions at virtually no extra cost. Engineers say, "We could have this thing do 5, 10, or 50 more things," Rust says.

He once received a computer mouse pad with a built-in radio, headset jack, clock with an alarm, and a calculator. "It's got a user's manual!" he says in exasperation. The features have nothing to do with the function that a mousepad serves.

No wonder a 2004 survey by the University of Maryland showed that 56 percent of American consumers felt overwhelmed by product complexity after buying a high-tech product, says Rust.

Manufacturers must carefully balance offering more functions against ease of use, Rust and others explain in "Defeating Feature Fatigue," an article in the February issue of the Harvard Business Review. While the bestselling Swiss Army knife has

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more than a single blade, the article points out, it isn't the most feature-laden model either.

In fact, top-of-the-line Sony products often have simpler controls than its less expensive models, say Aaron Oppenheimer, who studies consumer responses to products for Design Continuum, a product design consultancy in West Newton, Mass.

Manufacturers need to show "self-control" when designing products, he says. And engineers are not always to blame: Sales people urge designers to "put a lot of buttons on this thing" so they have a lot of features to talk about with customers, he says.

A techno-race is on, Mr. Oppenheimer says. "For every quantum leap we make in creating products that are easier or simpler to understand or use, we also get a quantum leap forward in technology that requires you to know more stuff."

But instead of being frustrated, people ought to look at the positive side of new technologies, he says. "Every generation is going to be presented with a whole new set of opportunities and challenges as we make leaps forward in what the technology can deliver," Oppenheimer says. "It's part of the fun of being alive [today]. Every week some new feature you never thought possible comes out, and you get to learn it."

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