

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

September 6, 2003

BUSINESS

Electricity is in the air at electronics showcase

Wireless Touch Panel, HDTV advances among stars at CEDIA expo

By April Marciszewski

Music in a home theater system surrounds listeners so closely they can feel the excitement. And sharks on a high-definition television look like they could swim right out of the screen.

The Custom Electronics Design and Installation Association Expo, which runs through Sunday at the Indiana Convention Center, is all about possibilities.

The largest custom home electronics show in the country is open only to those in the industry, however.

Retailers and installers learn about and order new home electronics for their customers. Retailers swap ideas with designers and manufacturers.

The trade show, with about 430 product exhibitors and already more participants than last year's 19,500, is an incubator for the future of home electronics.

"Wait 'til you see this," says **Frank Viggiano**, who teaches the only accredited consumer electronics course in the nation at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He squeezes his way through dense crowds, pointing to the Via!2 Wireless Touch Panel from Elan Home Systems.

He picks up the device resembling a video screen with a black frame, not much bigger than a large index card. The panel can control other Elan products, like Via! DJ, a digital music server that burns information from compact discs onto a hard drive and lets users access thousands of songs with the help of pictures of album covers.

Soon, Led Zeppelin classics seep out of the speakers. "You can almost step into any booth and see something new," Viggiano says.

It seems like almost every product not only can perform basic functions -- like storing music from compact discs -- but it also can be customized in endless ways. For example, the Via!2 touch panel can work with other Elan products to act as a security camera system.



Vendors and suppliers trade information at CEDIA, which runs through Sunday at Indiana Convention Center. The hanging televisions (background) are Zenith's new liquid crystal display HDTVs, which have screens similar to laptop PCs. -- Tim Halcomb / The Star

In the Lutron Electronics Co. lighting exhibit, visitors can see all the different color possibilities for light switch covers that hide screws and make the panels look tidy.

"That's what custom does," Viggiano says. "That's why people love this stuff."

The light switches go way beyond those in standard houses. They are part of a lighting system that homeowners can control with the touch of a button. A "movie" button can turn off certain lights and dim others. A "fire" button can light a path to the house's exits. Another button can even turn on every light in the house and make outside lights flash, in case of an intruder.

"It's very much geared to the wealthy," says Melissa Andresko of Lutron.

But the system, which does not require homeowners to rewire their houses, can be installed in stages to make it more affordable.

CEDIA Expo displays products already on the market or ready to be shipped to stores in the next few months. Although each company's high-end products may be out of the price range of all but the affluent, some are affordable for the masses.

Jeff Francisco, vice president of product development for SpeakerCraft, points to a ceiling speaker that can rotate nearly 180 degrees so listeners hear the sound wherever they are sitting. One pair of speakers sells for \$400; the top-of-the-line pair goes for \$2,500.

The expo's buzzword this year is high-definition television, maybe the most-talked-about component of home theater systems. Viggiano can't wait to see bigger liquid crystal display high-definition televisions. Now, Zenith's versions of the televisions run up to 30 inches. Plasma HDTVs come in larger sizes, some reaching 60 inches.

But pictures on the LCD versions, similar to laptop computer screens, don't waiver slightly up-close, like they do on plasma screens.

The technology is addictive, people in the industry say.

Once customers start watching television with Dish Network's digital video recorders -- and are able to pause shows as they watch them, while continuing to record -- they never go back to using videocassette recorders, Viggiano says.

"This is the future," he says. "It's replacing VCRs -- that's how big it is. It's happening now as we speak."

In fact, customers get so used to being able to fast-forward through commercials and create their own instant replays, they forget they don't have the same control over the radios in their cars, says Marc Lumpkin, communications manager for Dish Network.

"Once they get a DVR, they love it," he says. "You can't get the remote out of their hands."

Article appeared on the front page of the business section of The Indianapolis Star on September 6, 2003.