

Everything You Need to Know About Amazon Echo

It's not just a voice-controlled music player. It could be the key to controlling your home.

Amazon.com ([NASDAQ:AMZN](#)) wants to take over your living room, and then perhaps your entire home, but the online retailer has been remarkably quiet about it.

The Echo, a hybrid wireless music player/voice assistant/home automation hub, has had a slow introduction. At first it was sold by invitation only to Amazon Prime members. Those invites were doled out over a period of months as the company worked to refine the product.

At launch, the Echo, which I was lucky enough to be able to purchase, did very little. It tied in with Amazon's music service, allowing users to play songs from their personal catalog or the company's members-only service via voice commands. Other than that, the device was pretty limited. It could tell you the weather and answer some basic fact-based questions, such as "Who is Martin Luther King Jr.?" or "How many teaspoons are there in a tablespoon?"

It was a fun, solid voice-controlled music player with a few cute extras, and that alone was worth the discounted \$99 price (from \$199) that Prime members paid. But seemingly every week, the retailer has rolled out new features for Echo, and now, as it's being released for open purchase by anyone, you can start to see Amazon's broad vision for it.

What is Amazon doing?

First, Amazon has made [Echo](#) available to anyone who wants it for \$179.99, shipping July 14.

"We are grateful to our early customers for their incredible engagement and for providing us with invaluable feedback to help shape Echo as it evolves -- with their help, we've been able to add features like Audible, Pandora, home automation, sports scores, calendar, and more," said Echo VP Greg Hart in a [press release](#).

Along with making it available to the general public Amazon has also thrown the device open to third-party developers. The company gave some [examples](#) of what developers can do with the free Alexa Skills Kit, a collection of tools for developers to create new voice-driven capabilities for Alexa, the name the company has given to the voice assistant inside Echo.

- A device maker with an Internet-connected sprinkler system can integrate its sprinklers with Alexa, so a customer can say, "Alexa, ask my sprinkler to water my lawn for 15 minutes."
- A surf-report provider can create a new skill for Alexa that lets customers ask for the latest conditions at their favorite break by saying, "Alexa, ask Surf Status for my local forecast."
- The maker of a smart vacuum cleaner can create a skill for Alexa that lets customers control their vacuum by saying, "Alexa, tell the vacuum to start cleaning the living room."
- A fitness service can enable Alexa to access a user's workout history, so a customer can say, "Alexa, ask My Fitness how many miles I have run this week."

The Alexa developer tools aren't just limited to use in the Echo, they can also be integrated into third-party hardware, but the already-installed user base for the device is a clear target audience. With the kit, programmers have the ability to tie Alexa into everything from home security to lights, heating, and pretty much any Internet of Things-connected device.

What can Echo do now?

Since its launch, Echo has become both more useful and added new silly features such as "Simon Says," with which it will repeat what you're saying. Not all of the features are particularly useful, but all of them are easy to use, and a number do solve problems.

Because Alexa is a cloud-based "brain," it self-updates, and Amazon has steadily added new features. The original draw -- the ability to play music and other audio has improved as a number of apps have been added, including Amazon Music, Prime Music, Audible iHeartRadio, **Pandora**, and TuneIn.

These aren't all of the new features, but here are some of the most promising.

- **Connected home:** With integration of Belkin WeMo and Philips Hue products, use Echo to switch on the lamp before getting out of bed, turn on the fan or heater while reading in your favorite chair, or dim the lights from the couch to watch a movie -- all without lifting a finger.
- **Google Calendar:** Access your Google calendar events with Echo -- just use your voice. Hear what's on the calendar for the day or check if you're free for dinner with friends.
- **Sports scores and schedules:** Alexa will tell you the results of your favorite team's last game, the current score of a game they're playing, and the time and date of the next game.
- **Traffic:** Just save your work address, and Alexa will tell you the quickest route and travel time to work each morning so you know exactly what to expect before leaving the house. You can also add a stop to your commute in case you need to drop off a child at school or stop by a coffee shop on your way to work.
- **Customized news:** You can now hear from more sources in your news Flash Briefing, including *The Economist*, NPR Business, TMZ, and ESPN Radio via TuneIn.

Alexa also makes it easy to reorder Prime-eligible products, though I've struggled to buy things with it without having to make a few clicks in the associated iPhone app.

Amazon may be winning

Above all else, Echo is a very good music player with the added bonus of excellent built-in voice control, and some great apps. Add in the traffic, weather, and news features, and the device is worth buying even if that's all it can do.

By giving people something they want first, Amazon has found a way into their homes. Home automation is cool, but you're not missing it if you don't have it. That makes buying a home automation hub a tough purchase for people. Echo solves that problem. It's not just a device that controls lights and heat; it's a voice-based assistant that can play your favorite song (or the theme from *Rocky* if you need some inspiration).

That, and the power of Amazon's marketing, might be enough to get people to buy one, and that could give Amazon the first widely owned home-automation controller, even if that's not what people thought they were buying.