

Gadgets that took the year by storm

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Article from: 

Jennifer Dudley-Nicholson
December 15, 2009 11:00pm

GADGETS landed in our homes like waves on the shore this year, many with cutting-edge features, never-before-seen quality and, occasionally, more modest price tags.

But with so many gadgets appearing and disappearing in quick succession, it can be hard to keep up.

At Connect we've rounded up the year's 10 standout performers, those gadgets and technologies that you couldn't or shouldn't live without, so you can catch up, act knowledgeable and perhaps add them to your last-minute Christmas wish lists.

Amazon Kindle

Only the Amazon Kindle has revolutionised its chosen medium as much as the Apple iPod.

While Australian book lovers had to wait more than a year after its US release, October saw them in rapture, finally clutching the world's flagship e-book reader.

The Kindle is a slim, lightweight gadget with a screen made of Electronic Ink, so it is easy on the eye and reads like paper. But the truly groundbreaking additions that make the Kindle more than the sum of its hype are twofold: its substantial electronic library, and the mobile internet access included free with the device that lets you download any title from that library in less than a minute.

The e-book gadget is starting to have a serious affect on book sales as a result, with Kindle books director Laura Porco reporting that Amazon now sells almost one Kindle e-book for every two paper editions.

While some users were disappointed in Australia's smaller Kindle book repository, Porco says the book giant is currently seeking more deals with Australian authors and more than 200,000 titles are available to Australian readers.

Apple iPhone 3GS

Last year's hero gadget became this year's must-want upgrade in June when Apple released a faster,

meaner iPhone with a compass, voice controls and a better camera. The new model looked the same from the outside, even fitting the same cases, but the 3GS was designed for speed and outfitted with a more powerful processor that eliminated plenty of app lag.

The new model's 3-megapixel camera was also a revelation for iPhone owners, as it came with a new touch-to-focus feature that delivered sharper results.

Combined with last year's iPhone, Telsyte principal research analyst Warren Chaisatien says Apple has now captured a large chunk of the consumer market, becoming the country's second most popular smartphone in less than two years.

A low point emerged for the phone late this year, however, with the introduction of two viruses for the iPhone, though both only affected hacked or "jailbroken" iPhone handsets.

Windows 7

The view of Vista was not good. Microsoft's last operating system released under the full-time reign of Bill Gates did not go down well with users, barely chugging along with old hardware and rendering some PC peripherals, such as printers, unusable.

That is perhaps why the world's leading software company was so careful to get its next major software release right. Windows 7 underwent unprecedented testing before its October 22 launch, with more than 8 million users downloading the beta version of the operating system.

The result is a slicker, if similar-looking, computer interface that promises greater speed, better efficiency and more ways to access your files quickly.

With positive reviews and strong sales, Microsoft can safely chalk this one up as a belated win.

Google Android phones

Google promised and this year phone makers delivered in abundance.

The web giant that strives to "do no evil" brought its web experience and services to mobile phones, thanks to some of the world's biggest phone manufacturers.

Despite the popularity of the iPhone, experts including Telstra chief technology officer Dr Hugh Bradlow are tipping Google Android to eventually lead the market with its customisable screens, growing application store, open software and quick access to Gmail, Google Docs and web search.

Although mobile phones including the HTC Magic and Samsung Galaxy appeared with Google software this year, Australia might not have seen Google Android peak yet. HTC launched two new Android phones late last month in the HTC Hero and HTC Tattoo, and Sony Ericsson plans to add Google's software to its flagship smartphone, the Xperia X10, next year.

Foxtel Next Generation

Hard to fully fathom, easy to watch, Foxtel added a lot of new channels, services and definition to its line-up this year.

Courtesy of space on a new satellite, the pay-TV provider added 12 new standard-definition channels, 12 new high-definition channels and eight time-shifted channels on November 15, as well as an extensive list of new services.

New additions include a wall of TV and movie posters that lets you scan and record TV highlights with the press of a button, the ability to record shows from the ad promoting them, a TV show download service for subscribers and tweaks to its electronic program guide including one that lets you create a list of your favourite channels.

But subscribers will probably most appreciate the new channels of this launch, including Lifestyle You and 13th Street, and the fact that movie and sports channels are now available in crisp, high-definition.

The downside of these add-ons? Basic subscriptions rose \$2, and you might spend more time on the couch.

OTHER BIG HITS OF 2009...

LED-backlit TVs

Seemingly out of nowhere, light-emitting diodes became the must-have inclusion in your LCD TV. LED technology helped make these TVs slimmer, more energy-efficient and brighter.

PlayStation 3 Slim

Better and cheaper isn't a common combination, but the PlayStation 3 has become more energy-efficient, smaller and more inexpensive in this year's revamp. And the change has already sparked a sales hike.

Apple iPod Nano

The fifth generation iPod Nano surprised most music lovers by losing even more weight and adding a video camera, pedometer and FM radio receiver.

Flip MinoHD

This pocket-sized video camera hit from America finally made it to Australia this year, just in time to capture our Christmas memories in 720p high-definition video.

The Beatles: Rock Band

The band's first digital music outing encouraged even more music lovers to hook instruments up to game consoles.

... AND SOME TECH BEFORE ITS TIME

PSPgo

In the future we will likely download all our entertainment, from books and music to movies and games. But most broadband internet plans do not accommodate that sort of action just yet, inhibiting the growth of this new console. Some PSP fans also seemed reticent to abandon their game collection for this slimmer, lighter, prettier, disc-free console, leading to sales of less than 1000 in its first week on sale in Australia.

Digital radio

This long-anticipated radio upgrade arrived into the welcoming arms of audio enthusiasts in May. Digital radio offered plenty including extra stations, clearer sound, better reception and even the ability to pause and rewind broadcasts. Sadly, DAB+ digital radios were slow to arrive and are several times the cost of standard radios. There was also just one model available for use in the car. The industry says consumers bought 50,000 digital radios by September this year, but this is a service that is surely destined to peak as the hardware becomes more common, more varied and less expensive.

Sony OLED TV

LED might be the big acronym in televisions this year, but consumers don't seem ready for TVs with Organic Light-Emitting Diode displays yet. Sony staked a claim to the first on the market with the XEL-1, but at \$6999 (\$636 per inch) this 11in super-thin model didn't sell gangbusters. Its time will surely come . . . much later.

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