TVs You Can Talk To, Without Sounding Crazy

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LAS VEGAS (AP) — Talking to the TV is usually a sign of extreme agitation, mental instability or loneliness. TV manufacturers are set to make it a more rational behavior this year, with a range of sets that respond to speech.

LG Electronics on Monday said it will sell a remote with its high-end flat-panel TVs that contains a microphone. You'll be able to speak into the microphone to enter text on the TV for Twitter updates and Web searches. You still won't be able to change the channel or control the volume by yelling at the TV.

Samsung Electronics also said it would have TVs that responded to voice commands. In addition, it's launching its first TV with a built-in camera. As you watch the ES8000 set, it will watch you back, looking for hand gestures that prompt it to move the onscreen cursor or launch apps.

The two Korean rivals were the first to show new models at a preview day ahead of the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, which opens Tuesday. The show will feature many variations of so-called "smart" or Web-connected TVs.

Google Inc. has tried to break into the living room with software for smart TVs. So far it has been a flop. But Sony Corp. revealed at the show that it's sticking to Google TV and bringing out a Blu-ray player that runs the software. That player will have a remote with a microphone for voice-powered Web searches.

"Smart" TVs have been around since 2008, but two things are holding them back. One is that the conventional TV remote is a hopeless tool for Web browsing, typing, and other PC-like behaviors.

"Anyone who's actually checked email on a 50-inch (127-centimeter) TV knows it's not a good experience," said Shawn Dubravac, head of research at the Consumer Electronics Association, which puts on the show.

As TVs become increasingly complex, more buttons are popping up on remotes. But that's a trend that can't continue, Dubravac said. TV makers are now looking for alternatives. Last year, LG introduced a "Magic Wand" remote that's motion-sensitive, much like a game-console controller. This year, it's taking another page from Microsoft Corp.'s Kinect game console and introducing a 3D camera that perches on top of a TV and interprets viewers' motions, letting them control the on-screen cursor with hand movements.

"I think 2012 will be the year of the interface," Dubravac said.

Samsung will be using its built-in cameras to try to recognize who's in front of the TV. It will then bring up the right household member's personalized "hub" of

applications.

The other thing holding back "smart" TV: Viewers interact more with the cable or satellite set-top box than they do with the TV itself. The set-top box is where you find shows and change the channel.

Cable and satellite companies seem far less interested in revamping how people interact with their boxes. Dish Network Corp. unveiled a new box it calls the "Hopper" on Monday. It takes digital video recording to a new level by automatically recording all primetime shows of the four major networks. But it comes with a conventional remote, covered in buttons.

The renewed focus on smart TVs comes as TV makers are scrambling for new features to interest buyers. U.S. TV sales are in decline after a rush to upgrade to high definition and flat panels abated.

Amid the slowdown, Asian TV makers tried to make 3-D a "must-have" feature, but that effort has fallen flat. Leichtman Research Group conducted a survey that found 80 percent of Americans have heard of 3-D TVs, but just 5 percent intend to buy one.

There's another innovation waiting in the wings: Both LG and Samsung showed off TVs made of organic light-emitting diodes, or OLEDs, and said they'll start selling them this year. It's the first new screen technology since LCDs hit the scene. OLED sets are thinner than LCD sets and can boast impressive image quality. But they'll be too expensive to be more than a niche product, and manufacturing difficulties may keep the price level high for years. Sony brought out a small OLED TV a few years ago, but has since given up on the technology.

LG is also showing off an 84-inch (213-centimeter) set with a resolution that's more than four times that of top high-definition set. This so-called "4K" resolution represents another advance in screen technology that will take time to reach consumers, if it ever does — there are as yet no 4K TV channels or movie discs.

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