

THE SIMPLE LIFE

Technology-weary consumers want less



BY KIRSTIN PIRES

It's hard to say exactly when it happened, but sometime during the past 10 years, most of us involuntarily surrendered a big chunk of our lives to computers and to other networking devices that contain computer chips. Laptops, desk tops, cell phones, BlackBerrys, PDAs and remote controls — anything that needs to be programmed, requires technical support and can crash, die or merely freeze.”

So began a segment on a recent broadcast of CBS's 60

Minutes titled “Get Me The Geeks.” To that list, we might add remote controls for lights, spa jets, water-feature controls and console pads for chlorine generators, heaters and automatic covers.

“We are becoming slaves to our own technology — addicted to and dependent upon all sorts of beeping, flashing gadgetry that is supposed to make our lives easier,” the narrator continued. The story looked at the rise of those in-

creasingly complex devices that are sold as ways to simplify one's life and the service industry that has grown up around the ever more sophisticated array of "intelligent" devices.

Like practically any other industry, the pool and spa sector has benefitted from advances in electronics and automation. It's made pool care easier and more efficient, it's made pools and spas cleaner and safer and more enjoyable. And it's opened up a world of aesthetics and design once reserved only for the highest price points. But is the pool and spa world also — along with everyone else — suffering from too much of a good thing? We asked two industry heavy hitters — one a veteran, the other with a wealth of business experience in consumer products but relatively new to the industry — if they thought the recreational water world was following the larger trend.

"I think everybody is battling with the same thing," says Stuart Baker, vice president and general manager for Hayward's Goldline Controls.



Hayward/Goldline Controls

There's no need to reinvent the wheel. Consumers gravitate toward things that seem familiar and intuitive.

"Whether it's the remote control for the TV and the home entertainment system and the DVD player and the satellite, you end up with four or five remote controls. We do see it and we spend a lot of time looking at 'How do we make these things easy to use?' There's a lot of equipment on the pool pad, and it's pretty sophisticated equipment these days. It does become very complex."

Art Blumenthal, president of PresAir, has been in the industry about a year, but he's no stranger to business, having marketed consumer packaged products for General Mills. He's also been president of four electronics companies and has been involved in several successful entrepreneurial ventures and company build-outs.

"One of the things that I see, in my brief tenure here, is some of these electronic controls, while they do a myriad of things, they are really quite sophisticated and complicated," says Blumenthal. "Probably only half of all consumers actually know how to use their VCR to record something at the

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time they'd like to.

"And I think that appears to be true in the pool and spa world, too. Because the electronics offer great capability, people have put in a lot of options and a lot of control features, but I think it's harder to operate — we seem to hear that from consumers. We also hear that some service people have had difficulty maintaining these things. They are so

complicated it's often difficult to diagnose what exactly has gone wrong."

Like Baker, Blumenthal thinks it's worth developing easier user interfaces for controls.

"One of the things that we're trying to do is get to a simpler, more basic approach to the controls. Still electronic, but much simpler and much more basic. And make the maintenance and the service much easier."

And a collateral benefit is pricing. "In fact, we really want to go more toward the mid- and entry-level of the market rather than the super luxury side," says Blumenthal.

Baker thinks it's important to offer all the sophistication but in a user-friendly interface. "Clearly, you have to use software, and you've got to design intuitive menus, and I guess we've looked toward things like cell phone interfaces, because you try to find something — some software architecture — that people already feel familiar with," he says.

"I think Steve Jobs just said the other day that Apple just shipped their 100 millionth iPod. You've got to look at people like that and think, 'Well, they've cracked it in terms of user in-

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Probably only half of all consumers actually know how to use their VCRs to record something at the time they'd like to.

terface.' Because they're taking large amounts of data and enabling people to search through pictures, movies, music in a multitude of different ways." But the interface has to be easy, Baker insists. "The control has to be as simple as up, down, left, right and select. If it becomes a lot more complicated than that, you lose about 60 to 70 percent of the people who are trying to use your equipment, and they just don't like it. They'll throw it down or get the kids to set something up for them."

Saving Green

If you've been paying attention, you know the cost of energy is going up. Not just gasoline, but electricity and natural gas, too. It's the perfect environment for controllers that make better use of energy. Manufacturers are making more-energy-efficient appliances, but controllers can wring even more efficiency out of many devices.

"People are more cognizant of the cost of running the pool," says Baker. "So they're more interested in timers, how long the heat pump is running, how long the gas heat is running, because it's extremely expensive now to own a pool, in terms of operating."

Regulators are starting to look at how every device uses energy. "There are now a lot of grants being given in California for energy-efficient pumps, variable speed, that sort of thing," says Baker. "I think in 2007, a lot of states are going to start adopting incentives for people to become more energy efficient. And that's where I think controls come in to play, because controls can alter the way pool pad products like a pump behave. So we're looking into how we can incorporate that sort

What that allows you to do is press one button to change the whole mood of the pool.

of control over individual items to optimize their energy efficiency."

The amount of time devices run, the time of day they draw energy and the amount of energy they draw are all variables that controls can monitor and regulate. "In the United Kingdom we have something called Economy 7," says the British-born Baker. "It's a signal that's sent down a power line from the energy company, and that triggers the devices to come on. You buy products with this type of technology. So at night when electrical demand is lower and power is less expensive, things like washers and dryers and dishwashers go through their cycles."

Baker thinks this type of system could inform decisions being made in the United States. "I think there are already some states that have differential rates where you can buy electricity at different times. Running heaters at night is an efficient and more cost-ef-

fective way. So we're looking at using timers and devices where people could take advantage of those sorts of features."

Blumenthal looks to Europe for trends, as well. "I think the Europeans are more energy-conscious and I think that's coming to the U.S., also."

Another way to control consumption is to have options for how to accomplish a task. Heating water is a

good example.

"Much of the heritage of Goldline is in solar, so we have a very big business on solar controls," says Baker. "Where you've got multiple heat sources, there're things we can do that look at some intelligence: 'What's the best way of heating the pool?' And have the control start making some decisions. Maybe it should automatically select solar heating. Maybe

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you've got a set-up that's running a gas heater, but it's a particularly sunny day, maybe you want the software to choose solar heating.

"I think the ideas we have will play nicely into the ideas of environment and cost savings as we go forward.

"Energy efficiency is self-financing, whereas something like remote interface is sometimes perceived as a 'nice to have,' not a cost-saving measure. It's the sort of thing that sales managers love to talk about, because it's sexy, it's new, but whether a homeowner will pay the extra money to have it, that's the difficult thing. You start appealing to a much smaller percentage of the customer base.

"But very obviously right now are energy costs. So if somebody's spending \$1,000 and the payback is three or four months, then that's

something they are probably going to consider."

Manufacturers, too, need to look at expenses. "As the market has receded

have to start saving some money so I can lower prices a little bit.' I think you're going to see that a bit more in the United States," Baker says.



somewhat, I think manufacturers are thinking, 'Oh wow, I just can't put everything in here, and I can't do this, now I have to really look at my bill of materials and what's it going to cost me to put this thing together, and I

Smart Gadgets

It's not just consumers' desires for convenience that moves the control/automation market. There are some things that intelligent devices can do better than a human being who has only a few minutes each day to spend on the task. Sure, a reasonably intelligent person could monitor the pool chemistry, temperature and filtration several times an hour and make adjustments accordingly. But that's not a very efficient use of time.

So preserving the ability to do complex sets of tasks while presenting a simple, uncluttered face to the consumer is the holy grail for control designers. "For people who have very complex setups, where they do want

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controls & automation

to use waterfalls and lights to do light shows as well as control their pool pads, we have the ability for macros and groups to be assigned to a single button," says Baker. Think of a function key on your computer that you can assign to a macro you've recorded.

"What that allows you to do is press one button to change the whole mood of the pool." Through the magic of software and computer chips, the control can be programmed so that one button sets the lights to a certain cycle, turns on the laminar-flow jets, fires up the hot tub and tunes in the Cocktail Channel on satellite radio.

"You can do it yourself, but what typically happens is, we have preset light shows already coded into the software and when the builders install the pools, they can group macros together, so they can associate a light show with a particular set of

water features with a spa setting, with a music player," says Baker. "Then you can save that group, and pressing one button will make that all happen. And equally, you can press another button and it will all stop. So when



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the parents come home and the kids have been playing around, they can hit the button and it all stops and everybody goes to bed.

"Macros are a very elegant way of having quite a complex pool/spa con-

figuration saved in a simple setup. I think any remote where you start having 10, 12, 15 buttons that you have to use, it's very difficult, you can get a little lost in the software. So we've tried to get away from that. You can do it if you want to, when you're doing setup, but for those people that aren't interested in that, then simplicity is key."

It seems that everyone — from TV manufacturers to reporters to average consumers — is aware of the remote-control fatigue that's blooming in the U.S. Most people have learned as much as they care to learn about programming another household appliance or electronic device.

And it seems that manufacturers are working hard to address the problem. For the retailer, that means he or she can confidently assure customers that "it's easy — you'll pick it up in no time." ~

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