Put Your Home On Cruise Control

Even the most basic new car has more automation than a typical home.

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I don't have a particularly fancy car. In fact it's only a few rungs up from an entry-level go-cart, but when I open the door, the lights turn on automatically. When I shut off the engine, the lights stay on for a few minutes so I'm not in the dark as I reach into the back for my stuff. When I open the trunk, with a button on the key fob remote, a light in the trunk turns on. (It still impresses my kids that I can open the truck while sitting at the kitchen table.)

That's pretty basic stuff, but it's significantly more advanced than the lighting control most people have in their homes. Why does my cheapo car have a more complex, and user-friendly, automation system than the average $500,000 home? And my cheapo car has even more—the windows are powered, yes, powered! Imagine that. I'm pretty sure manual crank windows for cars disappeared a couple presidents ago, unless you count cars manufactured in formers soviet block countries. The car also has Bluetooth for connecting to my iPhone, a GSP to tell me I'm lost, and a handy little volume control on the steering wheel so I don't have to reach 14 inches to the stereo. That's car control and automation at its most primitive.

Things like intelligent light and window control, easily accessible music and volume control, remote security access, temperature … the kinds of things we take for granted in our automobiles (which we replace, at great cost, every few years) are considered luxuries in our homes. We spend a lot more time in our homes than our cars, but we expect our cars to perform better and be more technologically advanced than our homes. At the same time, we consider our homes as important long-time investments, while our cars are basically just consumables that are disposed when they've outlived their appeal.

So why don't more people take their home technology environment more seriously? The first answer is probably because many people still don't know that such technology exists. I was talking to one integrator recently who remarked at how impressed customers get when he shows them wireless light switches. Something as simple as turning off a light with a remote can elicit a greater *wow* response than a high definition projector. People expect a projector to look great, so they're not surprised when it does. They don't expect their lights to be wirelessly controllable, so that blows them away when it's demonstrated.

Cost is an issue of course—home automation doesn't necessarily cost as much as people usually assume it does, as least with entry level systems. Yes, a large home can

include $500,000 worth of automation, but basic lighting control and security for an average house can cost less than a 3D TV.

Mass Market?
But automation is still mostly a custom market, and often it's a retrofit market, which adds to the cost. In a car, on the other hand, lighting control, remote locks, etc., are all done at the factory at a mass market scale, so the costs are greatly reduced. It would probably cost more to get manual windows these days than power windows, because manual windows would be a custom order.

All automation companies are relatively small compared to car manufacturers like GM or Toyota. They're definitely not too-big-to-fail or big enough for a bailout. Consider the long list of small automation companies that have failed in the home market, many after trying to create mass market appeal.

So would a mass market approach to automation/control convert more customers? Maybe, but that depends on what you call mass market. It's been tried before. Do the concepts being launched by companies like ADT and Verizon count? They're basically cookie-cutter lighting and security solutions that will be sold as packages with monthly fees less than most people's TV bills. They will also likely be DIY-capable projects, though when I spoke with Verizon at CES, the company said it wasn't sure if it would allow customers to install the gear themselves.

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Grant Clauser has been covering home electronics for more than 10 years with editorial roles in several consumer and trade magazines. He's done ISF-level damage to hundreds of reviewed products and has had audio training from Home Acoustics Alliance and Sencore. He's also the author of the book *The Trouble with Rivers*. Follow him on Twitter @geclauser.