

## Something's Cooking in the Digital Kitchen

Whether you want to appeal to the lady of the house or the entire family, a high-tech kitchen is a great place to start.

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By Dan Daley

If there was ever a match made in heaven for builders using technology to sell homes, it's the increasingly complex relationship between thousands of years. The arrival of the home theater and media room may have temporarily shifted that focus, but the kitchen is again t

"The kitchen is becoming the key interface point for home automation, especially since in modern home design it's increasingly common to see the kitchen connected to the house's great room," observes Ray Lepper, president of Home Media Richmond, an integrator in the Virginia city. "Making the kitchen the systems control center of the home sets up that combined space nicely for entertaining."

Shawn Hansson, owner of Logic Integration in Englewood, Colo., says he will typically install a 12-inch flat panel display in the kitchen as an interface for the home's automated systems. He'll then program software widgets, such as real-time weather and stock updates, and he'll link the panel to programs like Microsoft Outlook or other e-mail program via Ethernet to the home's router. "Outlook on the touchscreen is replacing the note and refrigerator magnet," he says. "It also keeps the family computer free for other tasks." Hansson's screens can also call up a security camera, or even multiple cameras if a video multiplexer is integrated into the system.

Jason Hanley, owner of Acme Integration in Spokane, Wash., uses ELAN's Via! Valet touchpanel in kitchens and programs them in order to eliminate the need for what he calls "wall warts," which are anything from light switches to whole-house audio volume controls.

"Centralization of functionality is the trend these days, and the kitchen is the most central space in the house," says Hanley. "If you can incorporate a group of technologies into a single, simple control surface in the kitchen, the builder can accomplish several things, not least of which is reducing or removing the technology intimidation factor with the wife and making her interior decorator happy not to have to work around the warts."

### Smart Appliances

The fabled refrigerator that can sense when you're low on milk has yet to become a reality. But builders and integrators are preparing runways for something like it. Shawn Hansson says he has several builder clients who have requested cabled LAN connections for appliances in anticipation of the time when they can be accessed on a network. (And now several [smart appliances](#) are network-addressable.)

"We're already seeing that capability from high-end appliance makers, allowing remote users to do things like preheat an oven or get a ping when the washing machine is done," he says.

Jason Hanley sells LG refrigerators with built-in 15-inch LCD screens that come with component video inputs. Using an ELAN S12 multiroom AV controller and an M800 remote, he can send various video sources to the refrigerator screen.

"The kitchen is a hub where video cabling, phone lines, and the network meet up," Hanley says. "And I'm using Cat-6 cabling on all the structured wiring now. It's faster as the kitchen's electronics environment gets denser, and it has some sales flair."

If you want to look over the horizon at the next-generation connected kitchen, you'll find it at the MIT Media Lab's [Counter Intelligence Group](#), created to explore "technological approaches to functional, cognitive, and social support in the home, with a particular focus on the kitchen."

CounterACTIVE is a kitchen counter that's actually an interface for a combination computer, overhead projector, and electric field sensor.

research project uses a camera to replace the traditional oven window. Video and other data can be sent to any screen in the home.

### Looking for the Pay-Off

Even though fully integrated, high-tech kitchens are thus far a custom builder phenomenon, not all high-end builders have jumped headfirst. He's just now venturing into the field, using [Simple Control](#), a locally based company that markets its own home automation systems. He has an IP-connected range and refrigerator. As a sales proposition, it's working, he says.

"What I've found is that you have to let [prospective buyers] touch the technology, not just talk about it or put it in the brochure," he explains. "You lose them immediately."

Mason says automating kitchens isn't as clear-cut as, say, a home theater. "We're still learning how to configure them. Not everyone who wants high-tech kitchens help sales."

Michael Cronin, a principal in Cronin Wood Investments, a custom builder in Nashville, says the kitchens in his \$1 million-plus homes are a market, a touch screen in the kitchen that can control the home automation is no longer considered a luxury," he says.

However, while high-tech kitchens are a selling point with buyers, Cronin adds that the average cost to outfit them--about \$50,000 in a kitchen--technology is in the equipment, which the integrator or a distributor sells, not in the installation of it by the builder," he says. "I'm not looking for a return on investment."

*Dan Daley is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to DIGITAL HOME Online.*

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