



A report about branding at the
2009 Consumer Electronics Show.

Branding at CES 2009

The Consumer Electronics Show January 8-11, 2009

According to the numbers, this year CES was not as hectic as in years past. The lines for taxis were a little shorter, and there was a little less bumping into each other on the show floor. Preliminary estimates suggest around 110,000 visitors from all over the world attended this year's event, which is approximately 30,000 less than last year. At the show, more than 2,700 companies introduced an estimated 20,000 new products. According to a recent press release from The Consumer Electronics Association, CES 2009 is "electrifying the technology industry and helping lead the way to economic recovery." Well, we certainly hope so.

Observations about branding at CES 2009.

Every year we attend the world's largest consumer technology marketing event in order to observe how large and small consumer electronics brands are presenting their latest products and positioning themselves. This year we expected the mood to be somber due to the economic downturn, however despite the smaller crowds, there seemed to be a cautious optimism in the air.

This report is not about the latest gadgets introduced at the show, instead it is a collection of photographs and observations about what caught our attention while walking the halls and visiting booths.

Please note that the narrative that accompanies some of the images is intended to express our personal opinion, and it is not intended to promote or offend any of the brands included in this document.

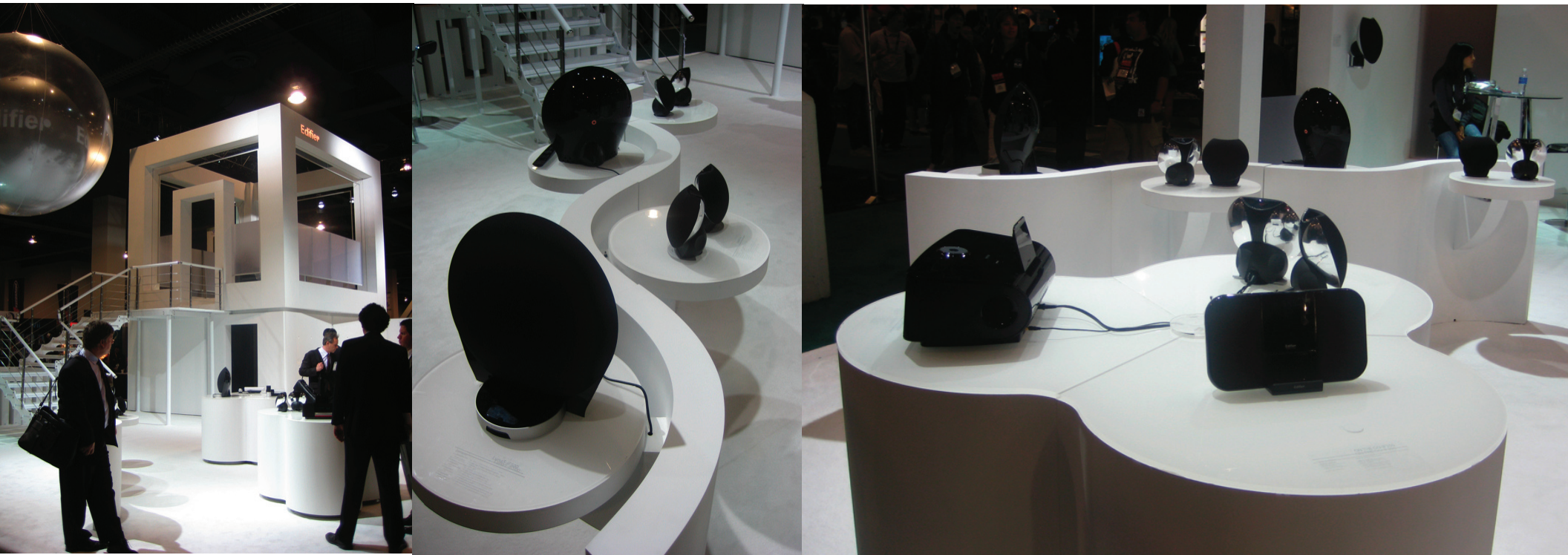
The following are companies that have been included in our report, in no particular order:

Edifier	LG
HiVi	Microsoft
BUILT	Intel
SanDisk	Motorola
Lexar	Samsung
HP	DMC
Kodak	
Sony	
BOSCH	

Smaller lines, but still lots of people. Some of the taxi lines at the convention center may have been less crowded, but at the airport they were just as long as they were last year. People frantically checked their BlackBerry's and iPhone's, making sure they had all the necessary appointments, booth numbers and contact information for the many meetings and visits that were ahead of them. In line I heard people speaking Italian, French, Vietnamese, Spanish, Chinese ... and a few other languages I could not identify ... confirming that, regardless of reductions in spending, people from all over the globe still flock to CES to see what's new in consumer electronics.



Edifier. We have to admit that we've never heard of this company before. According to its website, Edifier started as a small company established in Beijing, China, in May 1996, and continues to expand moving towards the goal of becoming a world-class, internationally recognized brand specializing in quality audio solutions. We were impressed with the simple, minimalist design that used basic geometric forms and an all white, museum-like color scheme. This allowed the black products to stand out in an elegant and dramatic manner. Everything was extremely well executed, even the logo—which appeared backlit on one wall (rather small) and on a large silver balloon that floated above the structure. Other than a brand like Apple, not many companies have the discipline to exercise this kind of restraint. As a result, my impression of the brand is that they focus on quality and elegance. Not bad for never having heard of them.



HiVi. HiVi is a manufacturer of stereophile level audio systems who decided to exhibit their products in a booth that transported the show's visitors away from the visual chaos of CES into an environment depicting a beautiful wooded area filled with trees and light. This simple and effective booth got our attention because it made such a big statement with such a small budget. Tall walls laminated with digital output encouraged visitors to escape the visual noise of the show, allowed the logo stand out, and reinforced the material (wood) used in many of the company's products. Another example of how design does not have to be about fancy materials and techniques to be good. Great job, HiVi.



BUILT. The design team at BUILT applies color and pattern liberally to everything they produce—with one exception: Their booth at CES. Instead they used a simple structure made from recycled paper that looks like it could have been folded down into a small box weighing a few pounds. The booth design is as creative as their products—and allows the colorful items to be showcased in an environment that is attractive, environmentally friendly, practical and inexpensive. All of which are great qualities to associate with this very cool brand.



SanDisk. The “do more” campaign for SanDisk provided the visual and contextual backdrop for the brand at CES09. Leveraging the familiar shape of memory cards, the brand uses it as a device to communicate that consumers can do a lot more with SanDisk—they can Shoot More. Save More. Share More. Play More. etc. And, in the process they seek to own the shape by connecting it to the visual language of the brand. The booth structure was not the outstanding feature of this exhibit—but the consistently applied visual style and the pervasive use of red, gave the booth stopping power and a clear messaging platform.



Lexar. We're not quite sure what message Lexar was trying to communicate at CES. The industrial aesthetic of the exhibit would suggest that perhaps the brand wanted to evoke hard-working, no-nonsense, industrial-strength attributes. Yet, the design lacked the quality of execution or materials to pull this off. Unfortunately corrugated steel and plywood don't quite make it ... and in no way compare to Frank Gehry's architecture, which was featured above the welcome desk. The booth looked like Lexar didn't have a place to store the shipping crates and decided to scatter them around the exhibit floor. We walked away thinking that the company is desperately trying to cut costs ... and in the process damaging the brand's image.



HP. Under the leadership of Mark Hurd, HP seems to have become a more stable and profitable company. Certainly the new CEO has heralded a great deal of changes. As branding professionals we must point out that the HP logo seems to be in a bit of transition as well. Last year the HP booth at CES featured a modification of the “official” HP logo, where the logo was enlarged and cropped, shedding the rounded edges that were at the basis of the identity system. And now, a new and more stylized version of the logo seems to be the preferred incarnation of the HP identity. We admit that it may not be the most consistently delivered identity program, but we feel that the new identity has much more impact than the “official” logo or the one used last year. Now the HP letters are contained in the circle, making for a more streamlined and clean design—while the dimensionalized finish makes it feel fresh and contemporary.



Official HP logo.



Version of HP logo used in the booth at CES2008.



The HP logo showcased at CES09 is dynamic, dimensional and energetic—while at the same time much more efficient and essential—thanks to the dismissal of unnecessary elements, such as the extensions of the “h” and “p” that were breaking out of the circle in earlier versions.

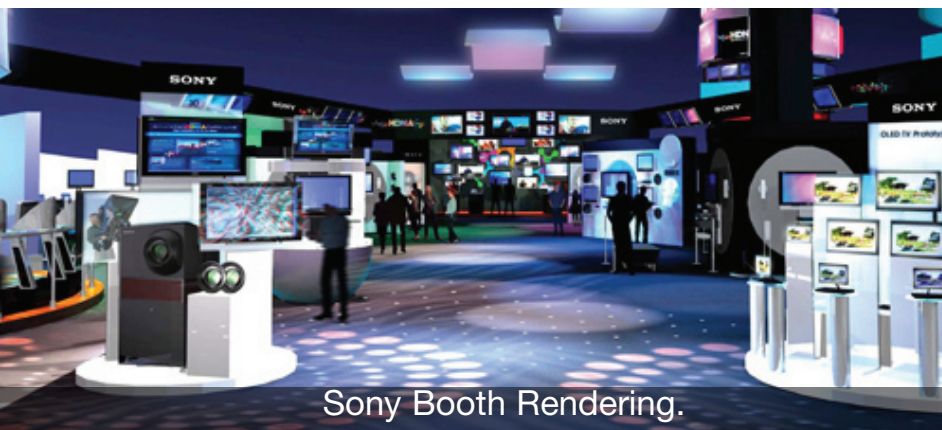
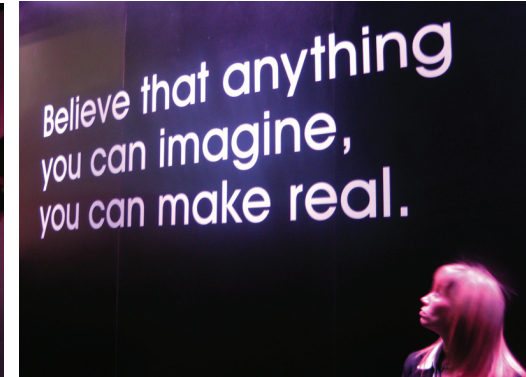
HP. The designers of the HP booth managed to strike a balance between color and playfulness, with warmth and professionalism. The signs, lightboxes and tabletops were finished in warm woods, providing a human and natural feel to the brand experience, while the circular sign evoked the simplified logo. The hand drawn typography supported the current campaign: "Making the computer personal again", and the prevalently black background provided a neutral backdrop for the colorful and fluid shapes that added vibrancy to the presentation. One of the standout products was the Vivienne Tam special edition notebook, which is the first time a computer company has partnered with a globally renowned designer to create a notebook PC adding fashionable style to a delightful technology experience.



Kodak. The photography pioneer has been trying to make its brand relevant to today's consumers. At CES they introduced a Digital Video Camera that can upload vids to YouTube ... thus participating in the world of social media. Kodak continued to leverage its sponsorship of the Celebrity Apprentice, and positioned its printers as the low cost ink cartridge alternative. At the same time, it introduced an OLED photoframe that is priced around \$1,000 (GULP!). Just as these were many differing messages, the booth used a wide variety of design techniques to get visitors' attention. Although each element had its merits, in our opinion the result was ultimately chaotic making it more difficult for any one message to stand out. And the fact that the messages were conflicting did not help matters.



Sony. According to the press releases, Sony's Vaio P was one of the stars of CES. Unfortunately we did not get a chance to peek at the tiny Atom-based notebook. The Sony booth, which looks as frenetic in the rendering below (from Sony's website) as it did on the show floor, made us dizzy with logos, monitors and messages ... and at the end it was hard to focus on anything at all. We could not help but notice that the booth seems not to have been updated in a few years ... and, although we applaud being financially responsible during these tough times, we think a little simplification could go along way to create a better experience. Perhaps, just because you can imagine it, you shouldn't always make it real.



Sony Booth Rendering.

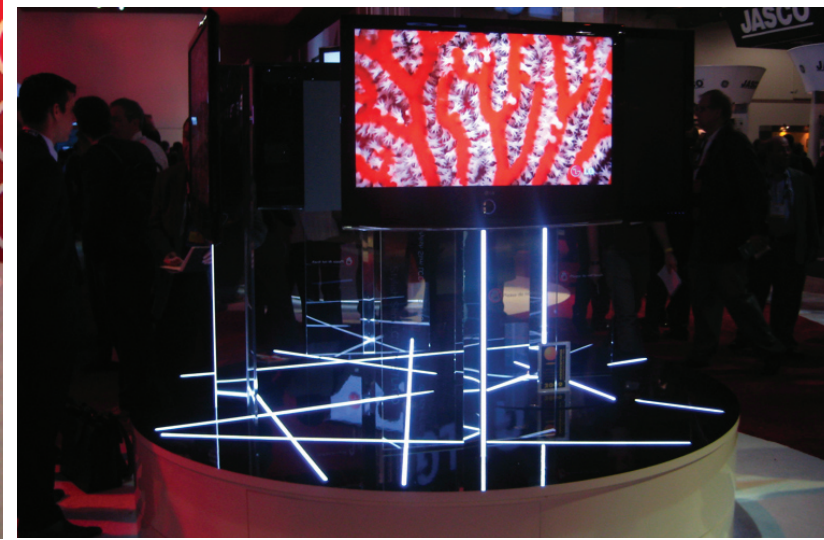
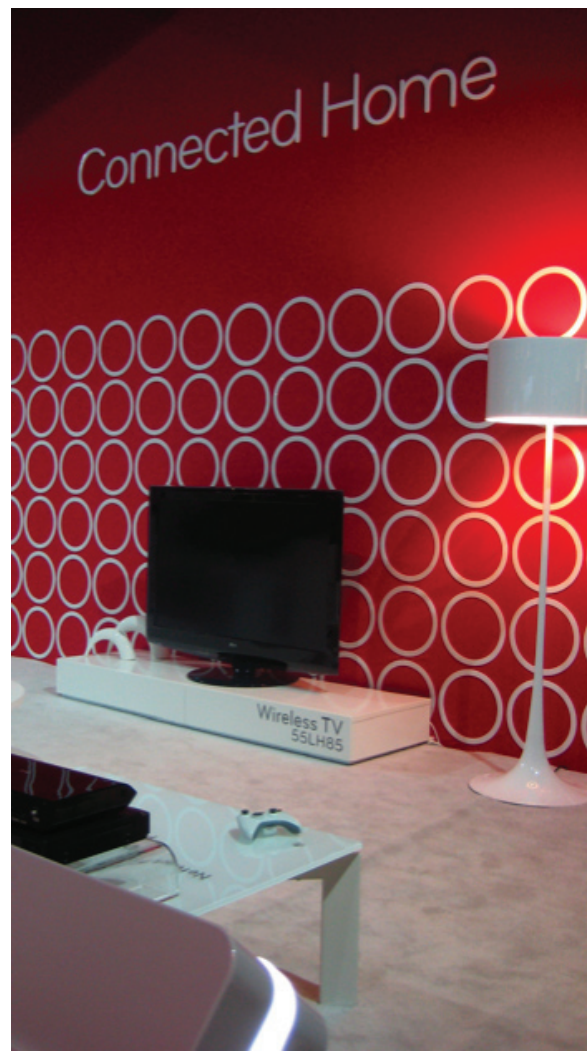
BOSCH. In the 10 or so years that we've followed CES, we never noticed the BOSCH exhibit. The booth was not a show-stopper in terms of architectural prowess, but the demo stations featuring camel colored leather, were so inviting and intriguing that we could not help but stop for a closer look. We were rewarded with a peek at an extraordinary automotive digital navigation system and instrument panel (very cool) ... and we loved the shape, texture, and even the leathery smell of the demos (obviously inspired by luxury car interiors). A very simple, and very effective brand experience at so many levels!



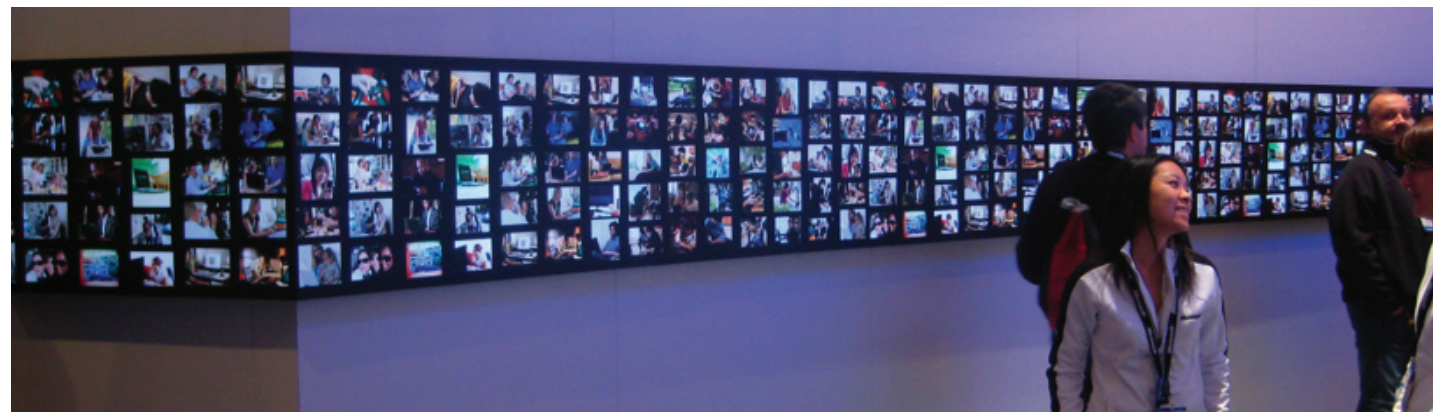
LG. "Life's Good" is LG's tagline ... and so was their exhibit at CES. In fact it was really good. The company introduced one of the most talked about products at the show, the LG Watch Phone ... while also displaying an impressive set of TVs, and new wireless connectivity. And, despite the diversity of products, the exhibit displayed remarkable continuity of design that was impactful, attractive, and well organized. The exhibit designers used a lot of interactive displays to communicate plenty of information, but managed to do it in a way that did not feel overwhelming. Kudos to them.



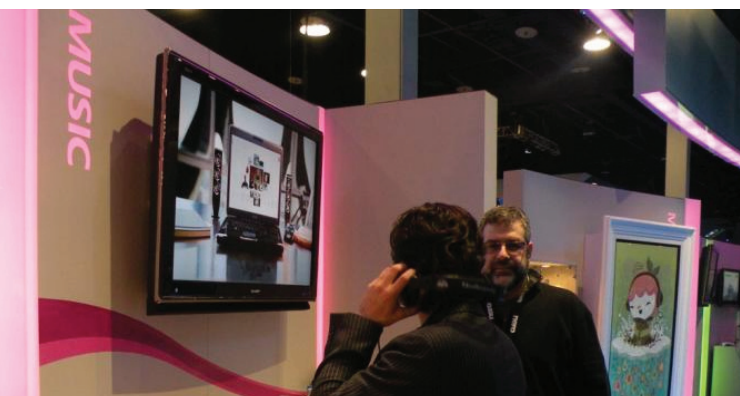
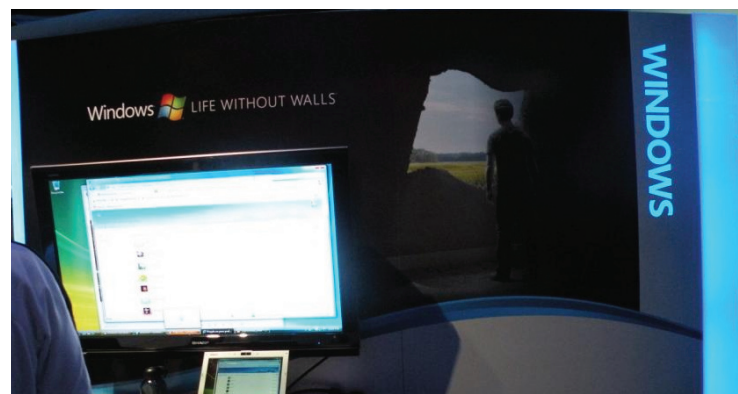
LG. The LG exhibit space was partly defined by a false ceiling from which circular canopies helped identify the various products featured in that area, making it easier to navigate the large booth space. Within the various areas different techniques were used to showcase the different products, with an emphasis on creating home environments that made the idea of the “connected home” a bit more real. Also impressive was a large wall of monitors displaying a highly creative and extremely engaging motion graphics loop that had visitors staring—while absorbing LG’s key messages.



Microsoft. Steve Ballmer delivered the pre-event keynote address for 2009 International CES, laying out Microsoft's vision for personal computing, connected entertainment and consumer electronics. And on the show floor, the software behemoth projected a much more cohesive presence this than we've seen in the past. What has usually seemed like disparate business units being thrown together at the last minute, now were presented as part of a cohesive master brand.



Microsoft. A sweeping, curving header snaked its way throughout the vast exhibit space, helping define the Microsoft area. Below the gigantic Microsoft banner, a series of displays enabled the company to showcase wide ranging products and technologies that included Zune, Windows Mobile, Interactive Television, Xbox games, etc. Each section was clearly identified, making it not only easier to find the stuff you might be interested in, but also providing a consistent branding connection to a very differentiated offering. As promised by Ballmer in his keynote address, perhaps Microsoft will actually start making things simpler and truly more connected.



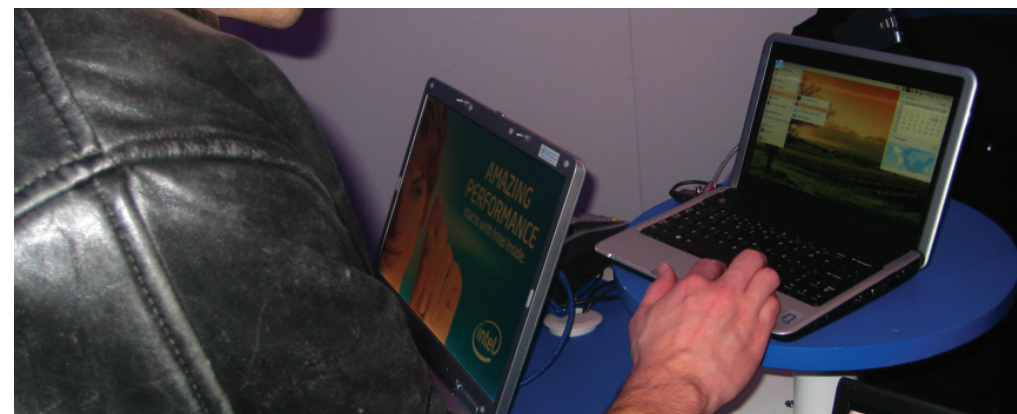
Intel. As it has done since 2001, which is when it first exhibited at CES, Intel made a big showing at the event. Granted, they leveraged some of the booth elements from the previous year, however they re-invented much of the experience on the floor, and as usual the booth was packed with curious visitors and a fair share of reporters and analysts. The Intel booth is visible from afar thanks to a lit canopy that hovers over the space and is enveloped in a blue glow. Within the space there are many different opportunities for the crowds to engage with the brand, including well trained Intel personnel that held actual chips so people could see how small they really are.



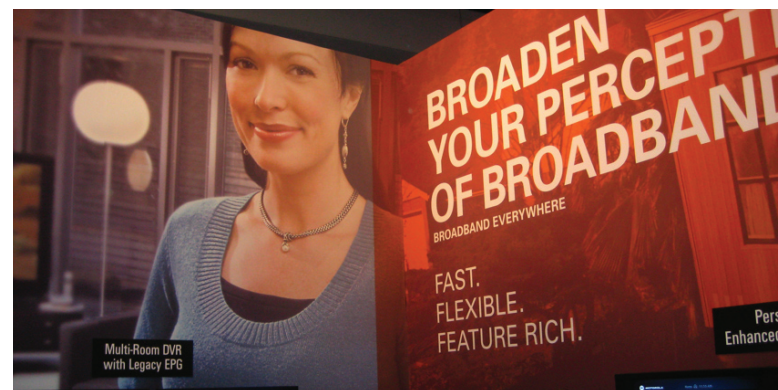
Intel. The booth layout was hard to see, since the floor was so crowded with attendees ... and we expect that this is good. The visitors were treated to many opportunities to participate in hands on demos that included physically interacting with music or trying out games to experience how well they performed on Intel based PCs. Also, there were several museum-like parts of the booth, where visitors could check out the many different devices that use Intel technology. The exhibit was very consistently executed in terms of colors and materials, and—although it featured a panoply of products and demos—it was not a chaotic and confusing brand experience, but rather inviting and quite engaging.



Intel. An eco-friendly Mercedes-Benz Smart car, completely wrapped in Intel's familiar tech pattern and featuring the wonders of mobile WiMAX got a lot of attention, but most of the action seemed to center around the new category of ultra small wireless PCs being dubbed "netbooks". These shrunkend down systems should not be confused with full-featured laptops and, due to their limited functionality and power, they are being positioned as "companions" to standard notebooks. And, at a pricetag of around \$250, Intel is hoping that consumers will find them irresistible.



Motorola. The Motorola booth has always appealed to us for its blend of dramatic photography, interesting use of technology and innovative—yet approachable—design. Well, this year we admit to being a bit disappointed. The photography lacked the fashion-forward edge of the past, settling for rather ho-hum imagery of “regular folks” staring back at the camera. The text accompanying the images was equally not inspiring. And, apparently, the products seemed to do more of the same. It seems that Motorola is in need of a little jolt in order to regain the reputation for innovation that has been associated with the brand with products like the RAZR.



Samsung. As busy and visually overwhelming as CES can be, it's hard for anyone to miss the Samsung booth. First of all there is the largest concentration of displays and TVs of every possible size that one has ever seen in the same place ... and then there's the enormous size of the Samsung logo which is splattered on every wall throughout the entire exhibit space. Yet, the products are well organized, elegantly displayed and easily admired. Overall, despite the heavy handed approach to corporate branding the booth does not result in a negative experience. We think Samsung has done a fantastic job of building its brand into a global powerhouse through its participation at CES ... and this year was no exception.



DMC. Apparently this company does not actually make any consumer electronics products ... however they invest in companies that do ... and at CES they showcased a few of the products made by some of the companies in which they invest. We found the booth to be exceptionally well designed, making a big statement with very mundane materials. The sheer fabric stretched over industrial trusses features extremely simple graphics, and the interiors are equally sparse. Yet, the inflatable conference rooms with Italian plastic chairs were not only innovative and eye-catching, they were perfectly practical and smart. And the museum-like displays did an excellent job of showcasing the products they were featuring. All in all, a great demonstration that good design does not need to be expensive or extravagant to be effective ... in fact, all you need is some restraint, a bit of style and a dash of innovation. We wish bigger brands could learn from this.



Observations: The Eco Trend

As we walked the show, we could not help but notice the amount of ecologically focused messages that now seem to be a part of almost every booth. Many brands are putting a lot of effort into showcasing products and processes that are ecologically responsible. We just hope that this is not just a marketing ploy motivated by a desire to appeal to consumers and shareholders. We believe that smart brands have been “green” for a long time - and not necessarily due to an enlightened corporate set of values. They have embraced ecologically responsible processes because they discovered that it would save money, and time and resources...and that is what we call a sustainable business model.

CES goes green. Natural. Green. Ecology. Recycling. Energy. The buzzwords of the new eco-culture could be seen everywhere at CES. Brands are suddenly not at all shy about showing off their ecological responsibility, and some - like Sony - are trying to make it clear that they have been focused on ecological practices for many years already. The new slogans ranged from "Eco Ideas" from Panasonic, to an adaptation of LG's tagline "Life's Good...when it's green". One of our favorites was "GreeNology", obviously the result of a merger of "green" and "technology". Well, we're happy for the planet, and hope these brands will continue to dedicate themselves to preserving natural resources, and hope that their ecological programs will be as sustainable as their marketing campaigns claim they are.

