

TAKING CONTROL

By Paul Diggin



We live in a fast-paced world. With work and school, baseball practice and piano lessons, errands to run, phone calls to make and bills to pay, there just never seems to be enough time.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed, and the last thing people want is for their homes to pile tasks onto their to-do lists. Unfortunately, houses demand time and attention. But with the latest array of home control systems available, you can make your home work for you instead of the other way around.

Home control systems can range from a simple universal remote that controls your flat panel display and surround sound system, to full house control where, with the push of a button, you can operate everything from the lights and thermostats to the sprinklers, security system, swimming pool heater, audio system, and televisions. It certainly isn't hard to imagine the possibilities, but unless you have an unlimited budget, it may not be feasible to bring all of these functions together. Fortunately, there are options available at many price levels that can manage multiple systems in the home.

One of the best ways to determine which systems and things to control in your own home is to identify the things that cause problems or are very important to your family's lifestyle. Does your family forget to turn lights off? Do you love music, but disagree about what to listen to? Do you always forget to adjust the thermostat when you go away for the weekend or on vacation? Does trying to operate your family room entertainment system, with its five separate remotes, drive you crazy? A control system can help you easily manage these details and enjoy your home more.



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house & home home technology

For example, if you're sick of making the rounds each night before you go to bed to make sure things are turned off or turned down, one command from a control system could turn off or dim the lights, adjust the thermostats and shut down the audio system. Arguments over television and music systems can be settled with a control system, which can divide your home into individual entertainment zones, enabling an audio system to play different types of music simultaneously in different areas. Control systems can even be used remotely (from a car or a computer) if you forget to turn on the security system or want to adjust the thermostats.

After you've identified the types of systems you'd like to operate, you're ready to talk with a custom electronics integration firm. Designing and installing reliable, easy to use systems that add real quality to a client's lifestyle is the goal of custom electronics professionals. You can find experienced companies by logging on to www.cedia.net, the web site for the Custom Electronic Design & Installation Association. This is a great resource to find local custom electronics firms and to ensure that they employ industry-certified technicians. These companies can help you choose the controls that are right for you, your family, and your budget.

There are many control options now available. Commands can be issued to systems from a variety of devices, including handheld remotes, wall mounted keypads and wireless touch panels. You can use a combination of controls or stick with one type. For example, a handheld remote or wireless touch panel makes sense for a media room, where you'll be primarily controlling audiovisual components from a couch or theater chair. A home systems integrator can add commands for lights and window treatments to this as well. In other areas, a wall mounted keypad can provide a convenient way to control music, lights, and drapery. A wireless touch panel is the best choice for those who want to see information such as song titles, the current indoor temperature, images from surveillance cameras, pages from the Internet, or digital photos. These panels, and the systems they are part of, give you the most bang for your control buck.

The following are companies that sell reliable, well-rated control products. It's a good idea to look at them all to get some ideas on what kind of control systems may be right for you. Universal Remote Control (www.universal-remote.com) offers a wide range of handheld remotes, the most sophisticated of which come preprogrammed with codes to operate lights as well as a host of A/V equipment. Universal Electronics Inc. (www.mynevo.com) offers the Nevo handheld universal remote. This is a suite of technology that enables complete home and digital media control. AMX (www.amx.com) makes highly customizable control systems. If you like the idea of being able to control music, movies, lighting, heat, motorized shades, or any combination of functions, look no further than AMX.

It's important to remember that even if the systems and controls you select today don't do everything you'd like, you can always add on to your home control system later. Most new products can be programmed in later by your home systems integrator. This is true whether you add a new piece of entertainment gear or purchase motorized shades for your media room. As long as it's electronic, it can usually be operated from a good home control system.

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*Paul Diggin writes a regular column
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