



Ten Home Automation Mistakes

Today, we have more choices than ever before when selecting home technology products. In fact, the selection can be so overwhelming that a consumer can spend a great deal of time and money and still not get the capabilities and/or quality they were after. With purchases often running well into the thousands of pounds, avoiding some of the more common mistakes can save time, money, and frustration.

1. Failing to plan

For those of you building a new home, you need to know that, until recently, technology and/or communications systems were simply not included in the design/planning of construction projects. Although many builders have become technologically savvy over the past several years, don't make the mistake of taking their expertise for granted. Communicate exactly what systems you want to include, and then ask to see what packages are available. Get the details on who will be doing the actual work and ask to see examples in existing homes or homes under construction. Insist on thorough documentation and labelling of all systems including test results certifying that installed cable plant meets established performance standards.

If your builder looks like a deer in the headlights when you bring up this topic, or says something like, "Our electrician can run any kinda' wire you want." Be concerned. Electricians are typically very professional folks who are experts at what they do, but few have invested the time and expense required to learn the ins and outs of low voltage wiring, home networking, audio/video distribution, home automation, etc. Now is the time to get this right.

2. Wiring mistakes

There are a number of "accepted practices" in the building industry that no longer meet today's requirements. For example, traditional telephone and cable television wiring is commonly installed in a "daisy chain" from one outlet to another around the entire house. While this was fine for plain old telephone systems, or getting an acceptable picture on a 21" television screen, it doesn't come close to handling today's requirements for systems like DSL, cable modems, high definition television, and the like. Today's systems require high bandwidth, low noise wiring installed in a "home run" fashion with each outlet connected via a dedicated circuit back to a distribution centre, typically located in a wiring closet.

3. Leading edge or bleeding edge?

"Early adopters" of new technology usually take a beating in terms of long term product value. People who purchased the first HDTV's a few years ago paid much more and got much less for their pound compared to similar systems purchased today. Bottom line, don't get in too big of a hurry to buy the latest and greatest unless you don't mind replacing the system with a newer model well before the end of its expected lifespan.

4. WAF - The “Wife Acceptance Factor”

Or more politically correct, the “Partner Acceptance Factor” is actually a gender-neutral term referring to an often overlooked concept. We must be able to live with our technology and the good news is that there are a number of products on the market that offer form without sacrificing function.

5. Letting your home technology control you

Today, there is simply no excuse for having 9 remote controls! Your entire family should be able to easily control your home’s entertainment systems without earning a degree in computer science. Get yourself a good universal remote.

6. Not doing your homework

I could have called this topic “Assuming the kid at the computer shop knows what he’s talking about”! The major home theatre magazines do “exposé” pieces covering this topic on a regular basis. They send “undercover” experts into big discount store chains armed with what should be simple questions (e.g., “If I plug my DVD player into this £2,000 high definition television, will it display HDTV?”). The answer, of course, is no (and should include a detailed explanation). Unfortunately, wrong answers to simple questions are all too typical in these stores. Let’s be honest, the big box stores don’t invest nearly enough to train their sales staffs in all the complexities of the gear they sell. If they did, their prices would be higher! You may sometimes run into very knowledgeable and helpful sales people on occasion, and, if you’ve done your homework, you’ll know how to recognize expertise when you see it. When you find someone who knows their stuff, get their card and arrange your shopping trips to make sure they will be available. Bottom line, do some research before you shop. Know specifically what capabilities you are looking for before you set foot in a store (NO IMPULSE PURCHASES!). Remember, you’ll be living with this gear for years to come.

7. Setup mistakes

Your work isn’t complete when you get your equipment home! For example, most people are unaware that televisions are typically not configured for home use out of the box. In fact, most displays have their contrast and/or brightness settings nearly maxed out in order to provide the most eye-catching demonstration on a showroom floor. Many consumers prefer an ultra bright picture, but leaving a set in this state can cause premature wear and “burn-in” problems for phosphor-based displays (e.g., CRTs or plasma screens).

It’s actually very rare to see audio or video gear calibrated correctly on a showroom floor. In fact, you often have to find a specialty dealer to see an accurate equipment demonstration. A friend of mine recently asked the right question, “Ok, so how do I know which one to choose if they are all set up incorrectly?” Exactly. . .see item number 5 above! Know what you want going in, and for the big purchases, take the time to find an example that is correctly set up in an environment that is similar to how you will use it at home. Again, this may take some additional time, but small changes in configuration often result in quality improvements that are very significant.

8. Security. . .not just for the corporate network

Too many people assume that there is “security through obscurity” and that their home networks are not vulnerable to compromise simply because they are small. The fact is that security is a vital requirement for every system and every network. You don’t have to create Fort

Knox in your home office, but taking some straightforward, common sense steps will protect your family's valuable computer systems and personal information.

9. Falling for the hype. . .technology for technology's sake

Always ask yourself what new capabilities, convenience, and/or enjoyment any given technology purchase will add to your life. Also ask yourself if you are making a purchasing decision based on advertising or "buzz" as opposed to what you really want or need. Yes, Bono is really cool on those iPod commercials, but there may be better choices available if you are just looking for a decent digital music player!

10. Not recognizing when hiring a professional is the best option!

If you've read this far in the article, you are probably pretty interested in the subject. . .and I'll bet you have spotted a recurring theme. If you are going to invest in any type of home technology, from home theatre to whole house audio to home network systems, there are many issues to consider if you want to get the job done right. If you are a hobbyist or "DIYer", by all means take advantage of the many resources available online, however, you simply want to enjoy the capabilities these systems can provide for your home, without becoming an expert yourself, consider getting some help. After all, the mistakes you avoid and time you save may more than make up for the modest additional expense!