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## The Smart Home Is Still Looking for a Market

By [Steve Lohr](#)

The vision of the smart home has been around for decades. And an appealing vision it is — a computerized triumph of automation, controlling a house's lighting and heating, even the kitchen.

Forgot to turn off the lights in the rush to get out the door? No problem, send a text message or voice command and the lights are shut off remotely. The smart home, of course, will have intelligent appliances, connected to the Internet, which can both cook or refrigerate food as directed from a cellphone or personal computer. A smart refrigerator, with sensors, can detect when groceries have been used and automatically reorder online.

Yet the smart home has remained a dream for years, just over the horizon. And the horizon keeps receding. Along the way, there have been intriguing pilot projects and lab experiments, but nothing that justified the extra cost to consumers.

Today, despite the spread of broadband Internet and home networks, consumers remain deeply skeptical about smart-home technology, according to a [new study that will be released on Tuesday](#) at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

"Mass market consumers have almost no interest in using 'technology' for home 'automation' or 'control,'" concluded a market study sponsored a smart-home research group, supported by companies including Whirlpool, Cisco Systems, Direct Energy, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Procter & Gamble and Zensys.

That suggests smart-home devices are not about to flood the marketplace. Whirlpool, the appliance maker, had long done smart-home research and pilot projects. But Carol Priefert, a senior manager in the technology group, observed, "Whirlpool is a mass company. I don't bring products out until there is a mass market."

Still, the technical foundation to make smart homes a reality is spreading. In 2008, 87 percent of American households had broadband Internet, up from 70 percent in 2005, the study noted.

What is needed is a "killer app" — a compelling use — and some government encouragement, according to Tim Woods, a partner in the consulting firm Poco Labs and an expert in smart home technology.

The killer app, Mr. Woods said, will be energy efficiency. To jumpstart that market, he said, the federal government will need to mandate the installation of smart meters in homes, phased in over years, as California is doing.

Then, Mr. Woods added, the government needs to guide the development of open standards in hardware and software, so the smart meters can communicate with a television set-top box, cellphone or PC. Those devices will serve as remote controls that allow a person to see how much energy a house is consuming, at what cost and suggest heating, lighting and air conditioning settings to save money.

The political timing, Mr. Woods said, is right. President-elect Barack Obama, he observed, has vowed to “make a huge effort around energy management.”

Once a technology platform is in place, Mr. Woods predicts, the smart-home market for intelligent appliances and other devices will take off. “The business excuse is going to come from energy management,” he said. “And that is what will allow the broader smart-home vision around time-saving and convenience to gain momentum.”