

From advanced automation to refrigerators that call your Blackberry, here's a look at some of the latest technology has to offer in the home.

BY JODIE WARREN

Every morning, Stan Sprenger is awakened the same way. At 6:30 a.m. muted jazz begins playing in his bedroom, gradually increasing in volume until Sprenger is fully awake. At the same time, the thermostat automatically increases by a couple of degrees, and the lights go on in his kitchen and living room.

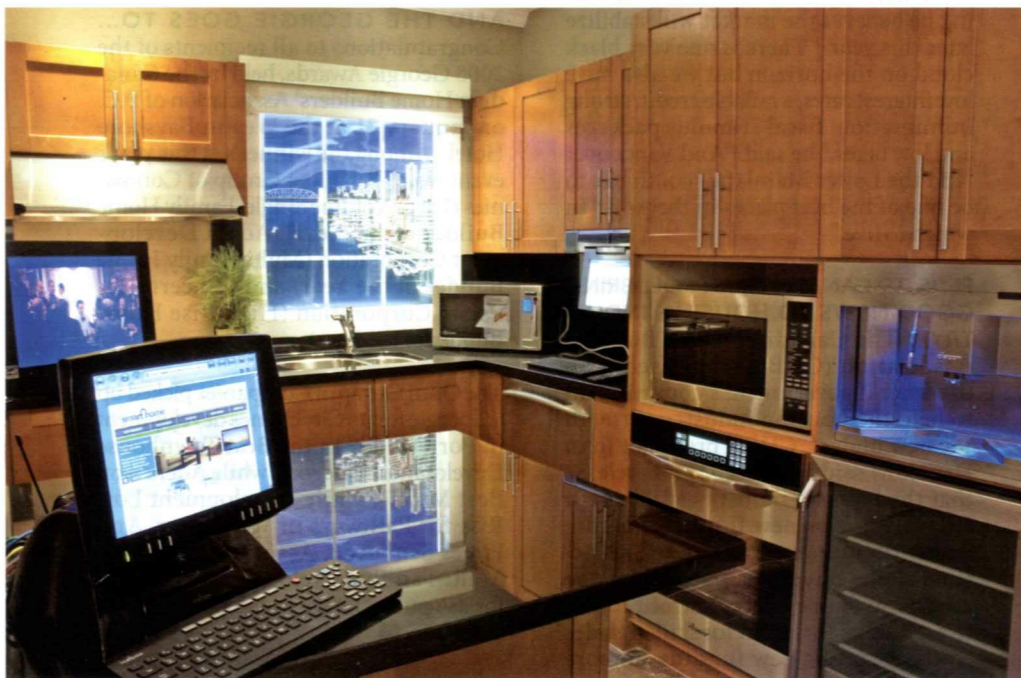
"It's so nice to wake up to a home that is warm and welcoming," says Sprenger, co-owner and managing partner of North Vancouver-based Smart Home Shop ([www.smarthomeshop.com](http://www.smarthomeshop.com)). Based in North Vancouver, Smart Home Shop specializes in integrating a home's entertainment, lighting, heating, data and security systems so that they are controlled through one, simple interface. Sprenger, who says he was inspired to form the company after observing the way technology has transformed the car industry, says the concept of home automation can be traced back to the 1980s but didn't really become popular until recently. "It didn't really take off back then because I think people were still too scared at the thought of having a computer running their homes," he says.

Sprenger says these days, a full system that automates the basic functions of a

home can be done for approximately \$10 per square foot. "A few years ago, doing this type of thing was expensive – there was nothing available under \$40,000," he says. Smaller jobs, such as integrating several lights and the thermostat, can be done for under \$5,000, and installing a wireless sound system can run as low as \$1,000. "The best option is still a wired solution so if you are building a new home, you should wire it beforehand," he advises.

#### APPLIANCES ARE HIGH TECH AND LOW PROFILE

If you are renovating or buying a new home, chances are you are familiar with the concept of 'built in' appliances, where your fridge and dishwasher are completely hidden from view. "This is the big trend with refrigerators," notes Leslie Wapenaar, sales associate for



Y Franks The Appliance Store. "It's not so much about the high tech features as it is about design integrity." In keeping with this notion of integration, manufacturers are coming up with innovative new systems such as 'drawers' that also allow for greater efficiency and accessibility. Fisher & Paykel's Double DishDrawer allows each drawer to be independently operated, and can match the wash program to the contents. The company's award-winning CoolDrawer allows you to set the temperature to freezer, chill, fridge, pantry or wine at the touch of a button. "These are great in places such as islands or food prep

areas, or in a bar to store garnishes, or even an office," says Wapenaar.

While integration is the big trend in kitchen appliances, technology is still playing an important role. Induction stoves - cooking with magnetic energy with specialty cookware to achieve the same performance of gas but the 'cleanability' and sleekness of a glass cooktop, are on the rise, with most manufacturers- Miele, Wolfe, Viking, KitchenAid and Bosch, now featuring induction cooktops. And companies such as Sub Zero are introducing fridges

with temperature monitoring devices. "What this means is that if the temperature drops unexpectedly in your refrigerator or wine fridge, a message can be sent to your Blackberry notifying you immediately," explains Wapenaar.

#### GOOD THINGS IN SMALL PACKAGES

Nowhere is the impact of home technology more evident than in the home entertainment industry, with the advent of the flat-screen television and increasingly sophisticated home theatre systems. "The biggest thing this year and last year has been the 1080p, 240-Hertz LCD panels," says Victor Vilas, district Geek Squad services manager (Geek Squad is a subsidiary of Best Buy Canada Inc.). "Going from 120 to 240 really allows for the streamlining of video, and so you get a smoother, less choppy picture." Vilas is also seeing a trend towards smaller home entertainment systems that take up a smaller footprint. Sound systems to accompany these screens, he adds, are much smaller as well. "The days of big honking speakers are over," he says. "Nowadays, it's the smaller systems such as the Bosa 321 that are the better quality."

"This is also an era where people are starting to take back their living spaces and that is where installation comes in," adds Vilas, noting that one of the biggest requests he sees is for the concealment of wires, as well as for TVs with inputs for a computer "so that you can surf the Net on a big screen."

Critical to using these systems easily, notes Vilas, is having a Harmony Universal Remote. "The problem with technology is that it often gets more complex," he says. "That is why it is so important, when thinking of your dream experience, to ask yourself about functionality to make sure that it's as easy as pressing one button." ■



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