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Jabil, Dashboard Devices at Consumer Electronics Show Jan. 2009



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Published Friday, January 9, 2009

When it comes to the world's biggest gadget geekfest, what happens in Vegas *better not* stay in Vegas.

Today, the Las Vegas-based Consumer Electronics Show — billed as the world's largest exhibit of new gadgets — wraps up four days of concentrated technology hype.

Thousands of companies, from king-of-the-hill Microsoft and Sony to first-time entrepreneurs like Clearwater's Dashboard Devices, are pushing their swath and niche of innovations to gearheads and engineers. More than four dozen Florida companies hawking everything from karaoke systems to phone jacks promising free calls are at the show. A dozen of those are based in the Tampa Bay area.

For all the thrill, the weak economy has diminished the usual crowd of 150,000-plus. It's off by as much as 25 percent, say attendees. And the mood is more "look, marvel and make note" rather than "buy, buy, buy."

This is not a column about what hot new products — be it the beta version of Microsoft's Windows 7 (so long, *Vista*), or the Palm Pre smart phone. It's about a behemoth tech show through the eyes of two different, yet equally excited Florida attendees.

One is a show veteran, an electrical engineer and research and development chief for Tampa Bay's global electronics designer-manufacturer. The other is a Clearwater entrepreneur unveiling after seven years of sweat equity his small business' product line — a compact PC system for vehicles. In separate interviews from Las Vegas, each comes across as a (smart) kid in one very big toy store. Here are their tales:

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As R&D vice president for St. Petersburg's Jabil Circuit, Jeff Lumetta spends a lot of time at giant tech exhibitions like the CES doing what he calls "scouting." Jabil, a \$13-billion-revenue company with worldwide operations, does not make electronics under its own brand. It designs and assembles products, from TV sets to mobile phone components, for other firms with household names.

Lumetta, 45, is scouting the Vegas show for new design ideas, for new product innovations, for competitors, and for fun. He's been attending CES, and the earlier Comdex show here since at least the early 1990s when the "wow" innovation was a 486 desktop computer.

"We are here looking to see what's coming, so we can factor that into our components and help our customers," Lumetta says from Jabil's hotel suite at the show's adjoining Las Vegas Hilton.

Jabil's not on the exhibit floor. Like many tech-sensitive businesses attending, Jabil selectively invites customers to its Hilton suite to see some of its latest innovations. One Jabil goody Lumetta calls his "Pico" projector. The device can enlarge and project small images (photo or video) captured by a cell phone to the size of a regular sheet of paper. Building the projector right into a cell phone is next on Jabil's design agenda.

This year, Lumetta does not see anything "revolutionary," but he rattles off some trends. First, the volume of intelligence crammed into mobile phones only continues to skyrocket. And phone design and aesthetics are gaining more importance.

"It's how the metal and plastic look and feel, and in some cases even the leather and wood on phones," he says.

Second, Lumetta sees a "growing middle class" of products that fit in the niche between mobile phones and laptops. "This will be a significant market," he predicts.

That notorious tech word — "convergence" — also crops up. People use three screens today, he explains: TV, computer and phone. The goal is to create one on-the-go screen for all three.

Lumetta complains that the CES show has crested. It's too big, broad and top-heavy with mammoth firms pushing entertainment and sales rather than genuine innovation. But take the time to prowl the endless exhibit halls, one of Lumetta's pet pastimes here when time allows. It is the small business scrapping for attention that offers the most creative excitement.

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"Today was supposed to be slow," says one of those small business guys. A clearly jazzed Mike Murphy, one of the founders of Dashboard Devices, chats at the end of Thursday's opening day.

The Clearwater business was started about seven years ago by some talented electronics and car buffs. They saw an opportunity to put a compact, 12-volt-powered PC into a dashboard to deliver computing power, Internet access, wifi, video and a host of other tech/entertainment options.

Dashboard waited years to get its product line right, then chose this Consumer Electronics Show for its debut.

"Things are going phenomenally well," says Murphy, 37 and Dashboard's lead engineer. In just the first day, he's been approached by attendees about his system's entertainment capabilities (even for small, weight-sensitive airplanes), by truckers about its tracking potential and the possibility of equipping trucks to film accidents, and by the government curious about the system's potential in emergency vehicles.

Dashboard, by economic necessity, is a young Clearwater company that finds its workers spread all over. They communicate by e-mail and find the most cost-efficient manufacturers via the Internet.

For Murphy, his CES exhibit is a chance to get out the word. He'll spend long days doing demos of his product line. It is not a time, given a recession, to take orders, Murphy admits.

The engineer in him is aching to run around the endless exhibits in search of cool tech. But for now, he is a businessman trying to launch product.

"I haven't been able to get very far other than the restrooms and the concession stand," he says.

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