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Mercury News

Tech gadgets in the pipeline seen at Demo

By Mike Langberg

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. - A camera that can detect ice on the wings of aircraft before takeoff. A scanning booth that measures your clothing size with radio waves. Software that stops tasteless e-mail jokes from being dispatched through office computers.

All these new products and more were on display Monday and Tuesday at Demo, a yearly conference where about 700 of the techno-elite gather to kick the tires of start-ups from Silicon Valley and beyond.

Many of the 73 companies presenting at this year's Demo fell into flavor-of-the-month categories including corporate network security, tools for blogging and Web services.

But some transcended the ordinary. Among my Demo favorites, for audacity if not always practicality, are:

1. MOTOROLA IRADIO: In a strange grown-up-attends-kindergarten moment, Motorola was the only big technology company presenting at Demo, with a new service for putting music into cell phones.

Due to launch in October, iRadio will send songs through the Internet to your home computer for about \$5 a month. Then you connect your cell phone to the PC through a USB cable, and the songs will move to a memory card inside the phone. You can also transfer songs from your own library of MP3 tracks.

You'll have to buy a new generation of Motorola phone, expected to cost about \$200 to \$300. Using Bluetooth short-range wireless networking and a \$75 adapter, iRadio songs can also flow from your phone to your car stereo.

2. LUSORA LISA: A new way of allowing disabled senior citizens to live independently, Lisa is a \$300 kit featuring a wireless pendant that looks remarkably like the new Apple iPod shuffle. The pendant, worn around the neck, can detect when the wearer falls down, and immediately sends out an alert signal to a box plugged into a telephone or home computer network. The box can automatically deliver a pre-recorded emergency alert message via phone or e-mail to a caregiver.

San Francisco-based Lusora expects to launch the product in six months for \$300. There's no monthly service charge, unlike many other such home alert services, and no computer is required if you only want phone alerts.

3. MDA ICE CAMERA: In wet winter weather, airplanes are at risk for ice buildup on the wings, which can cause crashes shortly after takeoff. MDA of Brampton, Ontario, has developed a video camera that can recognize even thin layers of ice on aircraft wings.

The Federal Aviation Administration and several airlines are now testing the Ice Camera, both as a safety tool and as a way to quickly tell whether aircraft require the extra expense and delay of de-icing.

4. QRSCIENCES of Carrington, Australia, showed another important aviation safety tool: a plastics-explosive detector about the size of an airport X-ray machine. X-ray screening is good at detecting guns, knives and other metal objects, but has a hard time with chemical explosives. The QRSciences detector, already at work in a few unidentified locations, scans luggage in only a few seconds -- speeding up travel by reducing the need for searching by hand.

5. NOVINT FALCON: Computer games could soon feel more real with the Novint Falcon, which provides "3-D touch" feedback to the user. Force-feedback joysticks and steering wheels today provide a crude approximation of reality, such as making a steering wheel harder to turn in a tight curve. Novint Technologies has come up with a way to provide feedback in three dimensions, so you feel the heft of a golf club swinging in your hand or the weight of a basketball as you make the game-winning shot. Novint Technologies of Albuquerque, N.M., is promising to deliver the Falcon early next year for about \$100.

6. INTELLIFIT: A glass kiosk with a big rotating arm that looks like something from a bad science fiction movie, the Intellifit booth uses low-power radio waves to measure your clothing sizes in about 15 seconds. Intellifit Systems of Philadelphia is putting the kiosks in shopping malls around the country, including an unannounced Bay Area mall by year-end.

I tried the booth and came away skeptical. The machine got my inseam right, but said my 36-inch waist measured 40 inches. OK, I'll confess to some middle-age denial about my expanding stature. But from my experience I'd call the system Intellifat. Two other people who tried the system at Demo had a similar experience.

7. OUTBOXER: Enron executives are in jail, in part because prosecutors found a long trail of incriminating e-mail messages. Several big companies have paid huge fines when employees sent out tasteless jokes to co-workers, not to mention the occasional dishonest worker selling confidential information to the competition.

OutBoxer from Audiotrieve of Boxborough, Mass., monitors outgoing e-mail and -- before you hit the send button -- pops up a warning if the message appears to be inappropriate. Your boss or the corporate security department might also get a copy of the questionable message.

This is more than a little creepy, but you've been warned: Be careful what you write in e-mails from work