

Are our household appliances getting too complicated?



Toastière Four-Slice Toaster

Six toast settings, independent slot operation, high-lift, cancel, defrost, and reheat functions, plus variable browning and illuminated controls.



ZapVac AXV Family and Pet Bagless Cylinder Vacuum Cleaner

The ridiculous name aside, this £150 monument to excessive disposable income includes a crevice tool, dusting brush, turbo tool, stretch hose and flexi crevice tool. You know, for cleaning your flexi-crevices.



Aqua Vivo Washing Machine

Although by current standards this model's total of 16 wash programmes is relatively modest, the sheer range of them is baffling. It boasts both the aforementioned baby and freshen up cycles, as well as duvet, allergy care, and bed and bath.

**Who needs a vacuum cleaner with a flexi crevice tool?
A washing machine with baby and freshen up functions?
A toaster with six browning modes? What happened to
the good old days of the on/off switch?**

The modern washing machine has a dozen or more cycles that no one has ever used. The baby cycle, for example, aimed, presumably, at parents too lazy to wash their babies in the bath. Or, quoting from a variety of machines, the 'duvet, sports, bed and bath, reduced creases, allergy', and 'freshen up' cycles.



The washing machine is hardly alone in this; all our appliances have learned new tricks. Posh kettles heat our water to a choice of temperatures, tumble dryers offer a variety of ‘dryness levels’ and even fairly basic toasters now proudly boast a ‘bagel function’. At the top end of the market, you can buy a fridge with a built-in radio and voice recorder, proving we’ve reached the stage of combining functions entirely arbitrarily. It has all become a little overwhelming.

Function inflation is not, of course, confined to the kitchen. We can see it in our computers and cars, our phones and televisions. ‘Fundamentally,’ says David Mattin, lead strategist at trendwatching.com, ‘I’d say function inflation is one consequence of the ever-increasing consumer thirst for the new – new products, services, brands, and yes, new features. Throwing more functions and features onto an essentially standard product is an easy way to constantly relaunch essentially the same product and argue that their product is new.’

Benefits or gimmicks

It is not without its benefits. Plenty of life-changing innovations, from the handy oven timer to the ‘job-endangering’ snooze button, started out as added gimmicks on familiar household items. But, in the kitchen at least, things are moving a little too fast, and rampant function hyperinflation has left many of us staring, uncomprehending, at a washing machine control wheel with more cycles than we have outfits to wash.

In theory, all such functions are a response to consumer demand: if a washing machine has a ‘freshen up’ cycle, it is because in a focus group somewhere, or on some customer feedback survey, at least a couple of people piped up and said, ‘I want my clothes fresher, but not cleaned.’ Yet such demanding shoppers are in fact a small minority: research shows that 70% of people use the same wash cycle almost every time, and nearly half of us are put off by complex multi-setting controls.



‘The innovation is obviously being driven by manufacturers’ desire to add value and to differentiate themselves,’ says analyst Neil Mason, head of retail research at market research company Mintel. ‘But from a consumer’s point of view, what they want is convenience and simplicity. You run into trouble when you add all these extra functions and consumers just get perplexed as to how to actually use them.’

Simple is best!

New settings clearly continue to be seen as an easy road to higher sales. Yet, as Mattin points out, some of the most successful products on the market ‘succeeded specifically because they did not succumb to function inflation, indeed they made a virtue out of having very few functions’.

Though Apple’s app store is now a fast-moving bastion of user-controlled function inflation, the iPhone and iPad’s predecessor began life as a reaction against it. ‘The iPod,’ says Mattin, ‘is a now-legendary example of a tech product that was beautiful in its simplicity. Compare earlier MP3 players, laden with various buttons and switches and features, with the iPod’s click wheel.’

‘There’s good evidence,’ he argues, ‘that the marketplace rewards designers who edit a product down until it does just what it should and no more. But that takes designers of genius. Mediocre designers – that is 90% of them – just throw more and more functionality at consumers and see what sticks.’

Perhaps, then, despite the current trend, the household of the future will be free of such baffling settings, switches, and dials. The ideal household gadget – be it a washer, dryer, or toaster – may one day sport a single, simple button marked ‘Sort this stuff out for me, will you?’ The machines can work out for themselves when, if ever, we merely want our clothes freshened up.