

# Camera Phones, Other Tech Get Big Improvements in 2013

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NEW YORK (AP) — As I look back at the more than 100 tech products we reviewed in 2013, a handful of gadgets and services deserve a second look.



It's become clear that one brand rarely stands out any more in whatever product category you look at. Competition is more intense than ever, which means consumers have more choices than ever. That's why coming up with a "best of" list for 2013 proved difficult.

So instead of a comprehensive list, I'm highlighting five big trends. These are also areas where further innovations are likely in 2014, so stay tuned.

### **Better camera phones**

This was the first year I didn't mind leaving my point-and-shoot and full-bodied, SLR cameras at home. Camera phones have gotten good enough to stand in for those stand-alone cameras in many situations.

Of the ones I tried, Apple's iPhone 5S proved to be the best as an all-around camera. It's good at getting the auto-focus right, even for moving objects. A larger sensor and an improved flash compared with previous models mean better shots in low light.

An honorable mention goes to Nokia's Lumia 1020. It's consistently good at night and indoor shots. It combines the small amount of light from multiple pixels into one, resulting in better lighting. It also has manual controls typically absent from camera phones.

Given how frequently people use their phones to take photos, expect even more improvements in the coming year.

### **Personalized technical support**

It used to be when you couldn't figure out how a product worked, you called your tech-savvy children. With Mayday on Amazon's new Kindle Fire HDX tablets, you no longer need to do that. Instead, just tap the Mayday button, and you'll be connected

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to a live customer service representative within seconds, even at 4 a.m. on a weekend.

Amazon's representatives can help you install apps, connect to Facebook or tackle anything else confounding you. You see them on the screen, but they can only hear you. They have a virtual orange marker to point you to buttons and menus on the screen. They also can take over your machine remotely and do it for you.

As gadgets do more, they also get more complicated to use. As someone who's constantly asked by friends and family for tech assistance, the Mayday feature is something I would welcome in other products.

### **Shackle-free phone plans**

The traditional way of buying phones: Pay \$100 or \$200 for a phone, and stay locked to your wireless carrier for two more years.

The new way: Buy or bring your own phone. Leave any time.

T-Mobile introduced that concept in March when it split the monthly phone bill into two parts — one for the device, and the other for the voice, text and data services. If you already have a device or have finished paying for it, your overall bill goes down. If you need a phone, you pay its full retail price, spread out into monthly installments. You're no longer getting a subsidy for signing a contract, but you're also not paying for it through a higher phone bill.

A few months later, T-Mobile introduced a program that lets you upgrade your phone up to twice a year, rather than every other year. The other national carriers followed with their own contract-free, frequent-upgrade plans. AT&T also lowered its service fees for voice, text and data for those who pay for phones separately. Sprint reduced those fees as well, but only temporarily.

Some people will still find it more cost-effective to buy phones the traditional way, but these contract-free options give consumers more freedom to leave their carrier or change phones frequently.

Meanwhile, some phone makers have come out with cheaper phones that do almost as much as the \$600-plus ones. Motorola's Moto G phone is particularly notable, at just \$179 — ideal when you pay for your own phone.

### **Laptops with long-lasting batteries**

Most laptop owners no doubt have found themselves out of juice at the most inopportune times, whether in the middle of an important business meeting or the start of a super-long flight to Asia or Australia.

A new generation of processing chips from Intel makes that far less likely to happen. These chips, known as Haswell, are more efficient at using power. It's now possible to go a full waking day on a single charge, with some reasonable breaks for

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meals and exercise.

The 13-inch MacBook Air, for instance, promises up to 12 hours of battery life. I was able to stretch that to more than 14 hours by turning off Wi-Fi, though nine to 11 hours was more common with general Web surfing. On the Windows 8 machines I tested, I was able to get seven to nine hours consistently.

Expect to pay at least \$1,000 for a Haswell laptop, though prices may start coming down in the new year.

### Internet television

A few friends and I dropped cable TV service this year. I saved more than \$100 a month and used some of that to buy a new TV. You might be wondering: Huh?

Several options are now available for watching television over the Internet. Watching on a computer or a tablet seems unsatisfactory.

With a streaming device such as Roku, Apple TV or Chromecast or a game console such as the PlayStation 4 or the Xbox One, you can project Internet video to the big screen. You'll need to subscribe to a handful of services such as Netflix or Hulu Plus.

The downside is you often need to wait at least a day for shows to become available online. That means avoiding spoilers on social networks. It's also a poor option for live sports. Major League Baseball has a great online service, but typically blocks hometown teams.

But it's money saved to buy the hot gadgets of 2014 — or tickets to a ballgame, plus beer and hot dogs.

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