

Sony's New Gadget: Electric Sockets

Over the past several decades, the evolution of home appliances and personal gadgets has transformed households and the way people live. Sony Corp., despite its recent slump, has surely contributed to that transformation with its Trinitron television sets, Walkman music players and PlayStation game consoles.

But Sony says there's one part of Japanese homes that hasn't evolved at all for half a century: electric sockets.

The company thinks it's about time those old-school sockets started going through some serious upgrades, the kind of changes that have made consumer electronics smarter and energy efficient.

"Electrical sockets are like a user interface for people consuming power," said Taro Tadano, general manager of Sony's home energy network business development, at a news conference Tuesday. "Can they just stay the way they are?"

Sony's answer is new electric socket systems that can recognize a gadget or appliance that is being plugged in, and automatically monitor energy consumption and possibly control power supply to optimize efficiency.

In one system, the plug has an embedded smart chip – similar to the chips used for smart cards – and the socket can process the information carried on the chip: Think of the plug as a smart card used by a commuter passing through a ticket gate at a train station, and the socket as the ticket gate that reads the smart card and lets the commuter through, Sony says.

In another system, the gadgets and appliances carry the smart chips themselves, and the signals from the chips travel through the electric wire and the plug into the socket. Inside the wall, the signals keep traveling until they reach the signal reading device. That way, instead of equipping every socket in the house with a signal reader, one such reader can cover the entire household.

Sony says its new electric socket systems could, for example, allow people to electronically pay for the power they consume. When installed at power charge stations for electric cars, or at public mobile phone recharging spots, the systems could verify each customer and settle payments based on how much power is taken, the company says.

Still, Sony will need a lot of support from many other companies in electronics, housing, and utilities sectors to make its dreams come true. For the new electric socket system to

maximize its potential, either electronic devices or their plugs would have to carry Sony's smart chips, while housing and construction companies would have to agree to use the new sockets instead of conventional ones in new homes.

"We are still thinking about how we might turn this into businesses," said Mr. Tadano. "This isn't something Sony can do on its own."

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