

Amazon Alexa vs. Google Assistant: Which one is the best virtual assistant?

We compare hardware, software and privacy features to determine which is better -- Amazon Echo's Alexa or a Google Home's virtual assistant.

Over the past few years, Google and Amazon have hustled to round out their product lines, hone their software and clear the mess left by toddler-age smart home devices. The Amazon Echo and Google Home brought the smart home category into its adolescence. Feel free to shed a ceremonial tear at their loss of innocence over the years: Soon Google Assistant and Alexa will be asking you to borrow the car and getting college brochures in the mail.



But as each platform comes into its own, it becomes more and more complicated to assess. When you factor in hardware, software, privacy and everything in between, which platform really is the best? It's time to take a deep dive -- and we'll start our comparison by looking at the entry-level smart speakers in each camp.

Hardware

When it comes to hardware, Amazon has the most well-rounded product line on the market, giving customers small, medium and large options for both speakers and displays. And while some of the new devices feel like minor iterations on past products (like the Dot with Clock), others are really good additions that blow Google's direct competitors out of the water. For instance, the premium-sounding Echo Studio received a much stronger review from us than last year's Google Home Max, and it costs less, too.

While Google doesn't boast the range of Alexa-products, the smart speakers and displays it does offer are impressive. Last year, we got a redesigned (and better sounding) Nest Mini, a second generation of its mesh router system, Nest Wifi, and a new Nest Hub Max smart display. Each of these are solid devices that we heartily recommended. That gives Google Assistant users their choice of two nice-size Google smart displays, not to mention Google Assistant-enabled options from Lenovo such as the Lenovo Smart Clock.

Amazon seems more concerned with pushing hardware innovation to its limit, and delivered the Show 8, Show 5, Echo Flex, Echo Studio and more just last year. Sure, Amazon's avalanche of Alexa in every shape and size of smart thing might be too complicated a lineup for some consumers, but for most, it just means more personalization in which products they buy.

Winner: Amazon



Software

Last year, Google attempted to unify the Nest and Google brands by shutting down the "Works with Nest" program and flipping the switch on "Works with Google Assistant." It did not go well. Users who made the irreversible change weren't happy to realize that they couldn't connect with popular third-party services like

IFTTT any longer, which left Google scrambling to clean up the mess.

That decision speaks to Google's willingness to break what works to lay the foundation for a better future smart home platform in Works with Assistant. That ambition, though often frustrating for users, is why Google has such impressive software across its varied products. Alexa is improving, but it can't close the gap with Google Assistant. And Google's superior user experience is further apparent in the intuitive design of the Nest Hub's (\$90 at Best Buy) smart display, which is miles ahead of the Echo Show's (\$230 at Amazon).

Aside from including Zigbee support in the \$230 Show and the \$150 Echo Plus, Amazon isn't doing much to support the expanding market of smart home devices. Alexa's open API -- the application program interface that lets nearly any hardware vendor create Alexa-compatible products -- better equips companies to work with its ecosystem than Google's more restrictive approach. But smart home success is about preparing for the future. Google seems poised to build a more holistic vision for the smart home moving forward, given the variety of popular tools the company offers (Gmail, Google Calendar, Google Search, Nest, YouTube, etc.).

There are thousands of devices that work with each of these brands, but Google is building a future-focused platform and thoughtfully improving it with each update and integration. Google recently added features like integration of the ad-supported, free version of YouTube Music (there's no signs of hope for YouTube on any Amazon devices yet). Other features like continued conversation so you don't have to constantly say "Hey, Google" and celebrity voices (hi there, Issa Rae) were Google firsts, followed by Alexa. Google continually sets the bar for what users expect, and Amazon follows suit. Thinking of those small details, is what puts Google ahead when it comes to the everyday enjoyment of living in a smart home.

Winner: Google





Privacy

When it comes to privacy, neither Google nor Amazon are shining examples, and both have employees listen to your voice recordings unless you explicitly opt out. Apple, by contrast, protects your recordings by default. That said, we're definitely seeing these companies market themselves as more privacy-focused right now, whether or not that's the case. The Nest Hub Max shows a green light, for example, any time it records audio, video or photos. Amazon went a step further to implement a physical camera shutter on its Echo Show 5 and Show 8 smart displays. Of course, Amazon also owns Ring, the video doorbell brand that has come under fire for sharing user locations with police departments and patenting unethical facial-recognition tech -- though it certainly has begun taking steps toward better security in the past few months.

The smaller scale discussion of specific devices is perhaps less helpful than looking at the broader picture: Tech giants have consistently demonstrated a willingness to jeopardize user privacy for the sake of profit.

Amazon profits off selling targeted ads based on user purchase data, and Google fundamentally depends on access to data -- whether that's by letting companies read your private emails on Gmail, or by gathering private health data on millions of people. You shouldn't trust any tech companies to have your best interest at heart. Put covers on your cameras, opt out of voice data collection, and read the fine print, regardless of whether you buy Google or Amazon products.

Loser: All the people whose data is being monetized.

The overall verdict

So which assistant is truly the best? There's a reason Google and Amazon are the two front-runners in the digital assistant race: they both boast some serious strengths. But while Amazon has released consistently strong devices, Google's future-looking approach to the smart home and impressive voice assistant are, by a small margin, the better investment. If we were starting to outfit a smart home from scratch in mid-2020, Google-compatible devices would be our starting point.

Winner: Google, by a nose

Editors' note: This article originally compared Google and Amazon's smart home strategies for 2019, but it has since been updated to compare the companies' smart home platforms writ large.

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