



Alexa ready to run

Amazon follows Google with the release of its smart speakers in Australia, introducing Alexa to the market

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Your home could get a new helper next week – an American assistant with years of experience, a surprisingly rich local knowledge, and a knack for playing the song you want to hear. Just two months after opening its store in Australia, Amazon is bringing its smart speakers to the party, launching three Echo devices powered by its voice assistant Alexa.

While the company's speakers dominate the market in the US, they will arrive Down Under with plenty of Australian "skills", helping users to check their bank balance, find a tradesperson, or order their favourite pizza without lifting a finger.

Amazon Devices and Services senior vice-president David Limp says the company initially created Echo speakers with the goal to "build the *Star Trek* computer", and had been able to augment its abilities over time with constant software upgrades and machine learning. Features added since its 2014 US launch include the ability to control televisions, play YouTube clips, stream music, set timers, tell jokes, or even place phone calls and send messages from connected smartphones.

"Customers love Alexa," Limp

says. "People really have an emotional attachment to the devices."

Delivering the Alexa experience to Australians involved spending a year adapting to the Aussie accent, Limp says, as well as adding cricket and rugby to its sports knowledge, the correct pronunciations of cities and towns, and the lyrics to *Waltzing Matilda* (though her singing voice is a tad robotic). "She also had to know metric instead of imperial measurements," he says.

But perhaps the biggest Australian additions don't come from Amazon, but local companies who have teamed with the retail giant. Amazon calls these additions "Alexa Skills" and says there will be more than 10,000 available when the speakers

are shipped to users this month, including surf reports from Coastalwatch, recipes from Taste.com.au, and travel updates from Qantas.

As in the US, pizza chain Domino's has jumped on the technology and will let Alexa users order their favourite pizza using their voice alone.

"Customers can also check the status of their Domino's order by simply asking Alexa how their order is progressing," says Amazon group chief technology and digital officer Michael Gillespie.

Amazon has also signed up businesses you might not expect to take part in a smart speaker launch. Utility companies including electricity and gas suppliers AGL and Energy Australia will allow users to quiz Alexa about their bills, while banks Westpac and NAB will let users ask about whether they've been paid or how much money they have in their accounts.

Services apps Hipages and Airtasker will also enable users to ask for tradies or human helpers for cleaning, gardening or maintenance jobs, and the speaker can deliver news from a variety of domestic sources, including Sky News, SBS, Network Ten and Realestate.com.au.

Amazon will face significant competition in the smart speaker stakes, however. In addition to Google, whose Home speakers arrived in Australia last year, Apple will launch its first Siri-in-a-speaker device, HomePod, in the country next Friday.



Alexa-enabled smart speakers let users order goods directly from Amazon.