

CES 2012: Microsoft goes out with a whimper

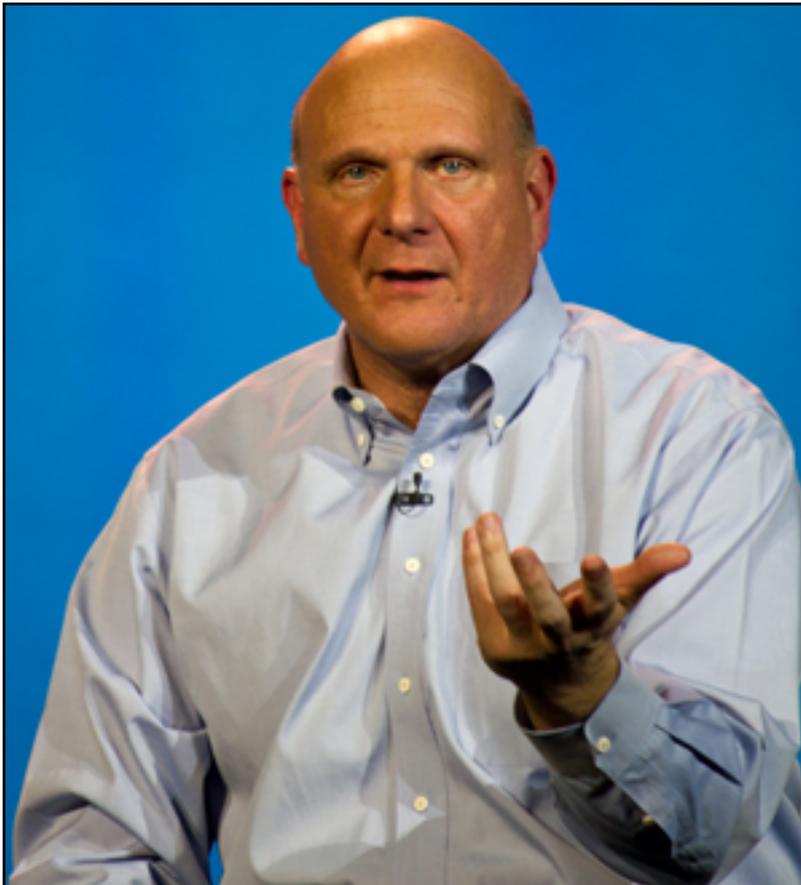
Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor, Special thanks to ECN's photographer, Andrew Maiman



For a company that changed the world with its PC operating systems and dominated CES for over a decade, Microsoft left a mute impression in its [swan song](#) [1] at the world's largest consumer electronics show. Even the star power of American Idol's Ryan Seacrest couldn't save Microsoft from unceremoniously limping into the sunset. Sadly, Microsoft's departure is but a small microcosm of CES' waning significance.

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Microsoft CEO Steve Balmer, who took over CES emcee duties from Bill Gates in 2009.

Credit to Andrew Maiman.

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Since 1995, when Microsoft became a stalwart component of CES, the Seattle computer giant has delivered the principle keynote address 14 times. In that time, the Consumer Electronics Show served as the springboard for a multitude of gadgets and technologies that have since joined the common lexicon: DVD (1996), HDTV (1998), DVR (1999), Xbox (2001), Plasma TV (2001), and the Blu-Ray Disc (2003).

But the major product announcements have slowed to a trickle. Recent years saw a handful of popular gizmos enter the fray but nothing as revolutionary as the VCR (1970), Camcorder (1981), CD Player (1981), or the Nintendo Entertainment System (1985).

The last four years were particularly frustrating, as the industry has done its best to shove 3D down our throats despite consumers' overwhelming rejection of the technology. The Palm Pre exploded onto the scene at the 2009 CES but quickly fizzled away. And Microsoft, for its part, has done little but announce enhancements to existing products, new Windows smartphones, or Windows 7 and 8. Its keynotes have become hour and a half spectacles, as a Microsoft rep tries to wow us with the Kinect, kitschy musical acts, and future operating systems.

So it came as no surprise when Microsoft announced that the 2012 CES would be their last. According to Frank X. Shaw, corporate vice president of Microsoft corporate communications, their, "product news milestones generally don't align with the show's January timing."

Many would argue that Microsoft's departure is indicative of CES' declining importance, especially as the preeminent stage for product announcements. In a NY Times Article titled "A Tech Show Loses Clout as Industry Shifts," Nick Wingfield noted that, "Many of the hottest new gadgets in recent years — including Apple's iPad and iPhone, Microsoft's Kinect and Amazon's Kindle Fire — were first announced at other events."

Microsoft launched the Kinect at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the video game industry's trade show and a recent spinoff from CES. The others were announced at narrow press conferences or proprietary company events (like Macworld). Apple, which [briefly surpassed](#) [2] Exxon Mobile last year as the largest public company in the world by market capitalization, has never had a big presence at CES. Some [would say](#) [3] that Apple has consistently "won" CES without even showing up.

The hottest gadgets of the last five years were neither announced nor featured at CES. Last year, the giant elephant in the room was Verizon's iPhone...everyone knew it was coming, but whereas Verizon showed up, their soon-to-be best-selling smartphone was MIA.



American Idol's Ryan Seacrest and Microsoft CEO Steve Balmer discuss the meaning of life and forthcoming Microsoft products.

Credit to Andrew Maiman.

Microsoft had a chance to depart CES with a bang, but their keynote was devoid of anything remotely fascinating (or new). Instead, we got Ryan Seacrest kibitzing with Steve Balmer and the insufferable "Tweet Choir" (exactly as it sounds—a choir singing a bunch of alleged tweets from the Microsoft keynote).

Seacrest, in a moment of candor, even prompted Balmer with a softball "What's next?," giving the CEO of Microsoft a chance to toss a bone to the thousands of assembled journalists and millions of tech enthusiasts watching around the world. A new gadget in development, perhaps...anything. Tech geeks have a voracious appetite; even the *name* of the next Xbox (to say nothing of pricing or release details) would have sufficed. Instead, Balmer limply trotted out Windows 8...exit stage right.

In 2012, CES broke another attendance record with a turnout of over 153,000 people. But the world's largest consumer electronics show has never been more irrelevant, and Microsoft's unceremonious departure is indicative of the event's declining importance.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.cesweb.org/events/keynotes.asp#Steve-Ballmer>

[2] <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/08/apple-market-cap/>

[3] <http://techcrunch.com/2012/01/05/best-ces-ever/>