



Karen Anderson

## Smart appliances? Weren't the 'helpful' ones already enough of a challenge?

*Club Columnist Karen Anderson sheds a little light on the current state of household appliances (by first exposing their awkward and sometimes ugly history).*

Remember when they used to refer to appliances as “labor-saving”? Those were the days when every house had a bulky white refrigerator and a bullet-shaped vacuum cleaner that you dragged around on sled runners. The kitchen had a toaster and a Waring blender. None of this was glamorous, but it sure was labor saving – a definite improvement over an icebox and a broom.

By the time I was a teenager, appliances had become “stylish.” This was the era of the matching avocado-colored kitchen appliances and the alarmingly named “electric broom.” These memories are somewhat dim because, as a teenager, the only appliances I had direct experience with were blow dryers and (this is so embarrassing) electric rollers. That changed when I graduated from college and took an apartment with friends. My memory of the vacuum cleaner we all shared was that it got louder and louder, and then it suddenly got very quiet. After taking it apart, we discovered a swollen gray fuzzy nest inside (the bag that we’d all assumed the other had been replacing).

I emerged from that grad-student phase to discover that appliances had become “helpful.” Refrigerators had ice-makers. Ovens were self cleaning. Microwave ovens had buttons labeled “defrost,” “melt,” and “popcorn.”

Unfortunately, even with consumer magazines to test, review and rate them, they were tough to choose between sometimes. I’d narrow my choices to three top-rated dishwashers, only to find at the appliance store that those models had been discontinued. If I gave up and bought a later, untested model, would it turn out to be a lemon? Usually I did – and it was.

Given this history, you can imagine how suspicious I was a few years ago when they started to sell “smart” appliances. Weren’t “helpful” appliances already enough of a

challenge?

Nevertheless, I bought one of those little pizza-shaped “smart” floor vacuums. A whirling dervish equipped with a whiskbroom, it made an astonishing amount of noise while zigzagging back and forth across the room. It was considered smart because, after hours of wandering, it learned where the walls were. Unfortunately, it learned that by crashing into them.

While I was puzzling over the smart vacuum, my cats cornered it and batted it down the stairs where it lay on its back, madly waving its whiskbrooms, until the battery died. With great relief, I packed the sad little thing off to Goodwill.

I’d have given up completely on smart appliances if the Scholarly Gentleman hadn’t given me one as a gift. It’s one of those happy lights that’s supposed to counteract the effects of depressing Seattle winters by waking you up very gradually in the morning. The light slowly gets brighter, imitating a sunrise, and after a while, a chorus of birds begins twittering, imitating a bad children’s cartoon.

Thanks to the smart lamp, instead of waking up grouchy at 7:30 a.m., I could wake up vaguely annoyed at 7:01, slightly annoyed at 7:02, rather irritated at 7:03, and utterly miserable by 7:25, which is when the light reached full glare and those horrible birds started in.

“Do you feel happier?” the Scholarly Gentleman asked when I dragged myself down to breakfast.

I grunted ungratefully. “I want my half hour of sleep back.”

“I think it takes a while to produce a real effect,” he said.

As usual, the Scholarly Gentleman was right. A few days later, when the birds went off, I went berserk. I sprang out of bed, lunged at the twittering lamp – then fell flat over a cat that had come in to check out what it assumed was our latest electronic cat toy.

“You look happy,” the Scholarly Gentleman observed when I appeared at the breakfast table, dressed and energized from a brisk morning walk.

“Happy?” I laughed. “I’m delighted!”

I beamed as I sipped my tea and savored the sound of the garbage truck picking up the trash where I’d just dumped that smart-aleck appliance.

