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Are our household appliances getting too complicated?



The modern washing machine has a dozen or more cycles that no one has ever used. The “baby cycle”, for example, aimed, presumably, at parents too lazy to wash their babies in the bath.

The washing machine is hardly alone in this; all our appliances have learned new tricks. Posh kettles heat our water to a choice of temperatures, tumble dryers offer a variety of “dryness levels” and even fairly basic toasters now proudly boast a “bagel function”. At the top end of the market you can now buy a fridge with a built-in radio and voice recorder, proving we’ve reached the stage of combining functions entirely arbitrarily.

Function inflation or “setting creep” – both of which are names I’ve just made up – is not, of course, confined to the kitchen. We can see it in our computers and cars, our phones and televisions. But is this really progress or are all these settings just getting in our way?

“Fundamentally,” says David Mattin, lead strategist at trendwatching.com, “I’d say function inflation is one consequence of the ever-increasing consumer thirst for the new – new products, services, brands, and yes, new functionality and features – and the way brands and businesses typically respond to that thirst.”

“Throwing more functions and features on to an essentially standard product is one easy way for consumer-facing brands to serve the consumer demand for new, more, and better; or at least claim they are serving it. It allows them to constantly iterate and relaunch essentially the same product with new features, and argue that their product is new.

It is not without its benefits. Plenty of life-changing innovations, from the handy oven timer to the job-endangering snooze button, started out as added gimmicks on familiar household items. Many objects we now consider normal were once separate and unrelated: the clock radio, for example, or our DVD-playing games consoles.

But, in the kitchen at least, things are moving a little fast, and rampant function hyperinflation has left many of us staring, uncomprehending, at a washing machine control wheel with more cycles than we have outfits to wash.

In theory, all such functions must be a response to consumer demand: if a washing machine has a “freshen up” cycle, it is because in a focus group somewhere, or on some customer feedback survey, at least a couple of people said: “I want my clothes fresher, but not cleaned.” Yet such demanding shoppers are in fact a small minority: research shows that 70% of people use the same wash cycle almost every time, and nearly half of us are put off by complex multi-setting controls.

“The innovation is obviously being driven by manufacturers’ desire to add value and to differentiate themselves,” says analyst Neil Mason, head of retail research at market research company Mintel. “But from a consumer’s point of view, what they want is convenience and simplicity. When you run into trouble is when you add all these extra functions and consumers just get perplexed as to how to actually use them.”

Perhaps, then, despite the current trend, the household of the future will be free of such baffling settings, switches and dials. The ideal household gadget – be it a washer, dryer or toaster – may one day sport a single, simple button marked “Sort this stuff out for me, will you?”