



Make your house smart

Smart devices can alert you to fires and floods through your smartphone and warn you if you're wasting water and energy

Unless you avoid the Internet, which is the new “living under a rock,” you’ve probably heard about the coming age of smart homes. Internet-connected devices for your home are so prevalent they have their own dedicated shelf space at your local big-box tech store.

Your old thermostat can be replaced with a Nest thermostat. Now connected, you can see your home’s temperature from wherever you happen to be. The smoke detector that always goes off when you have guests over has been made obsolete with the Nest Protect smoke detector — instead of beeping, it talks to you. Even your lights can be connected — at \$29 a bulb. Sure, the price is steep, but you can change the colours from your smartphone.



Alex Kinsella

This is the Internet of Things, connecting your once-offline devices and giving you the data. You may be asking yourself what to do with all that data. If so, you’re not alone. This was the problem that caught the eyes of George Tsintzouras, Ruth Casselman and Kevin Wright — founders of Alert Labs.

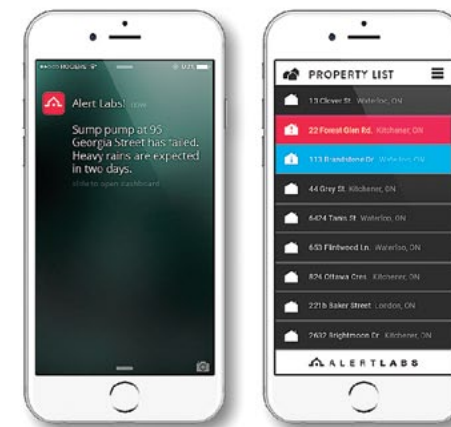
Veterans of BlackBerry and Christie Digital, these local tech workers saw an opportunity to solve a problem they were experiencing as multiple property owners. “As rental property owners, we constantly

found ourselves wasting money fixing preventable problems,” said Tsintzouras. The business partners looked for connected-device solutions that could help, but none met their needs. “We wanted technology to do the work for us — a virtual superintendent,” Tsintzouras said.

Alert Labs develops sensors that monitor your water meter, sump pump, water softener, furnace and sensors for flood detection. Monthly monitoring is billed at \$3.99 per sensor per month — so for less than \$30 a month, you can monitor some of the most vital — and costly — parts of your home. “We’ve built sensors that tell people what’s important to them in their language,” said Casselman. “There’s lots of data that customers can see, but Alert Labs tells you what’s actually happening.”

One major way the sensors differ is in the way they are connected to the Internet. Unlike most smart home devices that connect to your Wi-Fi network, Alert Labs sensors use a cellular connection such as your smartphone. This allows them to be connected quickly — and it also means that you don’t need an Internet connection at your property to use them. This is especially useful if your cottage doesn’t have Internet access or only seasonal access.

I’ve just gotten my first water softener and I’m still learning how it works. The Alert Labs sensor compares your water usage and regeneration cycle to help you tune usage and save salt. You can see that your water usage is 1,000 litres a week, but your water softener is regenerating every seven days, providing 4,000 litres of water. With this insight, you can change your water softener settings for better efficiency.



The potential cost savings go beyond reducing your salt use. The water meter sensor tracks your water usage down to the minute, giving you a view into superfluous water usage when no one is home — a sign of a leaky toilet. Tsintzouras uses the example of a renter who knew a toilet was leaking but didn’t want to bother the

superintendent with a small fix. That small fix would have cost \$25 versus the potential for hundreds of dollars of wasted water.

For rental property owners or cottagers, the dread of a power outage or broken sump pump is a powerful fear. According to Aviva Canada, almost 40 per cent of home insurance claims are due to water damage. In addition to Alert Labs sensors’ use of a cellular connection instead of Wi-Fi, they are also battery powered for up to five years. A mid-winter storm taking power out at your cottage appears on your smartphone as an alert — giving you much-needed notice to avoid a call to your insurance company.

To learn more about Alert Labs sensors, visit alertlabs.com.

Alex Kinsella has been part of Waterloo Region’s tech community since 2004 and is always looking for the next great gadget (or tacos, if it’s Tuesday). Find him on Twitter at @alexkinsella

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