Google Assistant’s Ambient Mode turns Android devices into smart displays

Today at IFA, Google is announcing a new feature for Google Assistant: Ambient Mode. On a few upcoming Android phones and tablets, this new mode will turn those devices into something like a Google Nest Hub (neé Google Home Hub) display when docked. It will show calendar info, weather, notifications, reminders, music controls, and smart home controls. Also like the Nest Hub smart display, it will automatically show a slideshow from your Google Photos account.

It’s not a new idea; Alexa has been turning tablets into little Echo Shows for a year or so. Google’s version will work on a couple of Lenovo tablets and also — perhaps a little surprisingly — two upcoming Nokia *phones*. You’ll get many of the benefits of a Nest Hub but in a device that you can pick up and take with you because it’s also an Android tablet or phone. It’s potentially really useful as a home remote, too (if you know how to set up your Android device to do that along with Assistant).

Google’s implementation is, like many things involving Google Assistant these days, a little strange and a little duplicative of current software. Although Ambient Mode on Google Assistant replicates some of a Nest Hub’s functionality, it’s not exactly the same thing. Instead, it does the stuff listed above in an interface that’s noticeably different from the Nest Hub.



Why is this not just the Nest Hub software? There are many possible explanations:

1. One explanation is that the software that powers the Nest Hub and similar devices won't run well on a full Android device. Thus far, we've seen devices based on Google's Cast platform and Android Things but not full Android.
2. It's possible that this is part of a larger trend of Assistant taking over more features that used to be handled by other software that Google makes.
3. Maybe somebody just missed a meeting, and nobody realized that these were two different projects entirely until it was too late to stop them.
4. All of the above.

My money's on the fourth option, by the way. The thing we don't know yet is whether Ambient Mode is something we can expect to be a standard feature on Android devices going

forward (or at least on Android devices that use something close to Google’s version of it). It’s not clear why Lenovo and Nokia are taking the lead here.

One of those devices — the upcoming Pixel 4 — seems like an awfully good candidate to support Ambient Mode.

Google has a big pile of other IFA announcements, mostly related to Google Assistant support in a bunch of third-party devices from speakers to headphones. It’s also touting more Android TV support for Assistant, plus more integrations with smart home products from the likes of Bosch, Siemens, Electrolux, and Nuki.

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