The Verge 2017 tech report card: Amazon

So many things happened in 2017 that it’s hard to know where to get started when sizing up a wide-reaching tech behemoth’s past year. So for Amazon, maybe it’s best to start with a simple statement: it lowered prices on avocados.

Yes. In June, Amazon bought Whole Foods for $13.7 billion and reduced avocado prices at its stores by $0.50 to $1.00, in a move that, generally speaking, pleased consumers. It also added more Alexa features and more and cheaper Echo devices in a series of moves that, generally speaking, pleased consumers.

And this is pretty much what all of Amazon’s 2017 consisted of, at least from a consumer’s perspective, walking through its digital aisles: making small but pleasant changes that improved the shopping experience, made life a little bit more convenient, and made prices just a little bit cheaper.

It’s just that Amazon did it all in ways that have huge, world-shaping implications.

Amazon put Alexa devices in 22 million more homes this year
Amazon’s Whole Foods acquisition allows it to take on the grocery industry and become an even bigger competitor to Walmart. Amazon released five new Echo devices (plus two Echo accessories), putting always-on microphones and camera-enabled devices into an estimated 22 million more homes. It announced an in-home delivery program that *relies* on you having cameras inside your home in order to let a delivery person indoors to make shopping *even more* convenient. It also continued to develop stores that require little human presence to operate and drones that can deliver packages with minimal human oversight.

All of this is immensely meaningful for the future of work,

life, shopping, and business. But for the moment, all it really means is that life is ever so slightly more convenient and prices are ever so slightly cheaper for Amazon customers.

It’s kind of a terrifying picture when you put it all together. From the perspective of a shopper, it’s all very nice and pleasant and convenient. And it’s hard to argue that Amazon hasn’t been immensely successful in crafting that image.

Alexa got better, but didn’t meaningfully improve

That said, outside of its online marketplace business, Amazon has hit some real hurdles this year. The chief of its movie studio was among the first men to go after the #MeToo movement took off. Jeffrey Tambor quit *Transparent* over harassment allegations. Its cashier-free convenience stores have taken some time to move past critical flaws. Drone deliveries still seem like a far-out dream. Amazon ended up *chasing* Walmart in a battle over free shipping, offering the worse deal for the first time in a decade. The company finally made a waterproof Kindle, but it’s relatively expensive. One of the Echo Show’s most important apps doesn’t work because the company remains in an incredibly petty battle with Google. Amazon released a long-delayed Apple TV app that’s surprisingly buggy. Alexa got better, but didn’t meaningfully improve. While Alexa continues to be adopted by many third-party developers, Alexa is still best used inside actual Amazon devices.



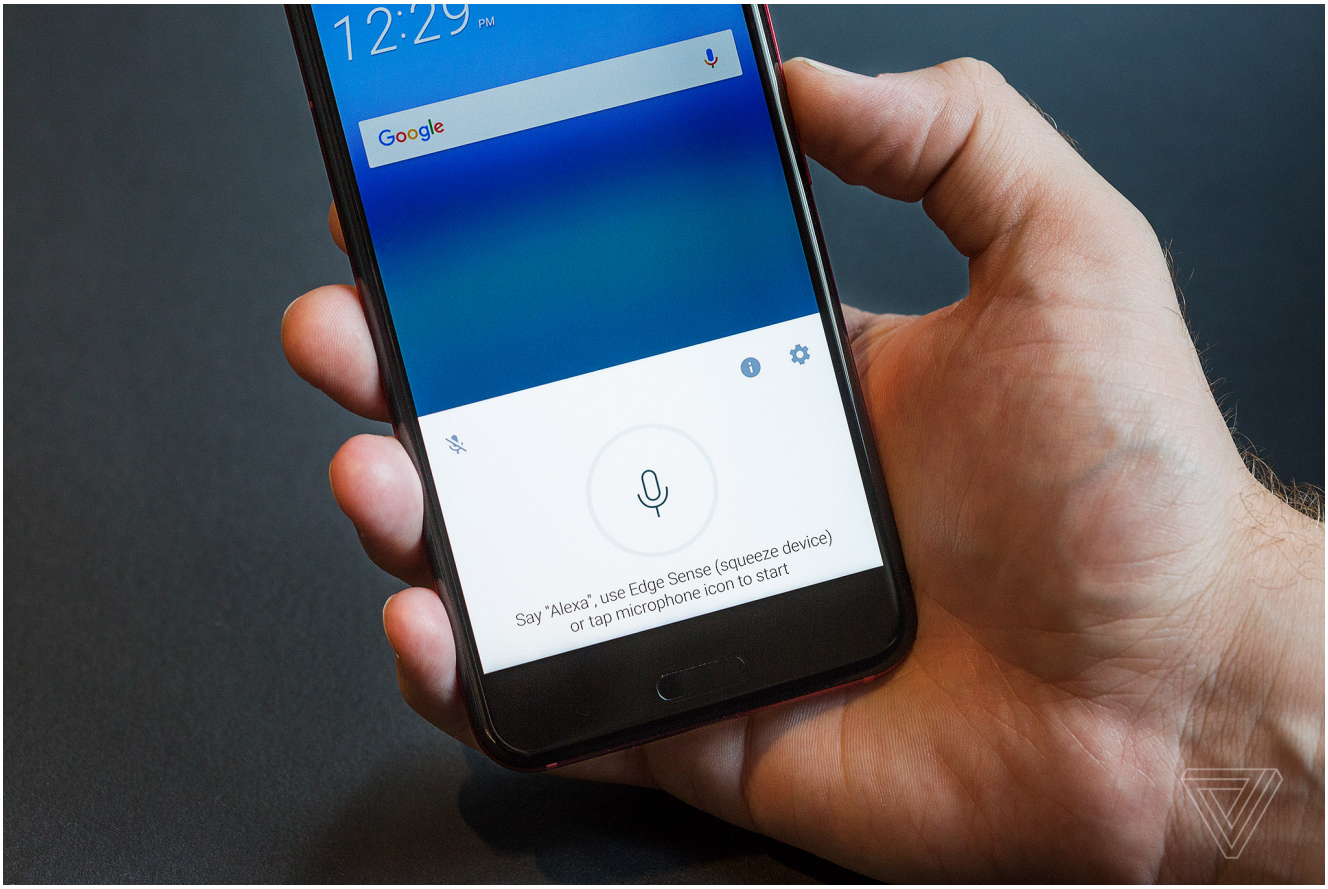


Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

Also, while there weren't any horrifying exposés of work conditions in an Amazon warehouse this year, there were two deaths of warehouse employees in September that remain under investigation for potential workplace safety violations.

Perhaps the most telling part of Amazon's year was this: when, in September, Amazon announced it was seeking proposals for where to build a second headquarters, it seemed like every city in the US desperately scrambled to get the company's attention. It was offered land, tax breaks, free sandwiches — even naming rights to a city — anything to bring the jobs and technology and money that follows Amazon around.

I don't know that 2017 was a particularly great year for Amazon, but it was certainly a year when you didn't want to be one of Amazon's growing number of rivals. And while it can all look intimidatingly monstrous from a top-down view, from a consumer's perspective, it was a good year to be shopping at

Amazon.

Final grade: B

B 2017 Grade

The Verge 2017 report card: Amazon

Gold Stars

- Huge expansion of Echo devices
- We did want cheaper avocados
- Waterproof Kindle

Needs Improvement

- Warehouse working conditions
- Working nicely with other platforms
- Carefully selecting who Amazon Studios works with

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