Home-networking boom coming

October 3 2005

New home developers -- and Silicon Valley technology companies -- are collaborating to bring consumers the "digital domicile," a completely connected home, where TVs, iPods and other appliances are all linked, finally taking the home networking concept from theory to reality.

"While the smart home seems to be a valuable and convenient concept, there has yet to be widespread consumer demand for products found in the smart home," reports the study, "Networking Technology Brings Intelligence into Today's Smart Home," by Research and Markets in Dublin, Ireland. "Factors such as pervasive Internet access, home network growth, and the acceleration of broadband access to many homes are driving consumer awareness."

The idea of the smart home was popularized by Microsoft founder Bill Gates during the 1990s but generally was perceived as a plaything of the wealthy. Now, however, blue-collar home developers, staffed with carpenters and electricians and collaborating with white-collar techno geeks, are integrating the technologies into homes for Middle America.

According to research by The Diffusion Group, a research consultancy in Plano, Texas, about 47 million U.S. homes will have networking capability within five years. Meanwhile, consumers with older homes who want the cool technology are either going to have to integrate it themselves from a variety of off-the-shelf components or hire a systems integrator.

"Most homes are not yet equipped with a plug-and-play infrastructure of

communication, entertainment, security and climate control products," said Steven Ostrowski, a spokesman for CompTIA, the Computing Technology Industry Association, in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill. "In many homes, cables and wires from home theaters, computers, broadband connections and second phone lines hang off joists, drift across floors, or are crammed behind the big-screen TV -- not exactly the image one has of the 21st Century digital home."

A number of non-profit industry organizations are striving to promote the networked home, including the Continental Automated Building Association (caba.org), the Internet Home Alliance, (internethomealliance.com) and the HomePlug Alliance (homeplug.org).

"Home-technology-integration firms are responding to the growing demand for integrating and trouble-shooting various home subsystems and enabling consumers to take advantage of and fully enjoy the connected home lifestyle," Ostrowski said.

Technology developers are also moving in with new products. Last week Motive Inc. in Austin, Texas, debuted what is said to be the first end-to-end managed service meant to bridge a service provider's wide-area network to a subscriber's local-area network, a company spokesman said.

Next January a firm called SpeakerCraft in Riverside, Calif., a maker of customized architectural loudspeakers, is expected to launch a new product that will enable homeowners to network up to six iPods throughout their residence, all controlled by a digital display that mounts on a wall, as if it were a light switch, a spokesman said.

Another approach is being taken by a company called Coaxsys, in Los Gatos, Calif. The company employs existing coaxial TV cable to network a home.

"Coaxsys' TVnet technology has been deployed by over 60 U.S. service providers to date," a Coaxsys spokesman said.

As a result of such technology deployments, as well as wireless LANs, SOHO routers, residential gateways and networked cameras, the market for home networking equipment is expected to jump "from $9 billion today to $20 billion by 2009," according to Research and Markets.

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Citation: Home-networking boom coming (2005, October 3) retrieved 16 August 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2005-10-home-networking-boom.html