Devices give weather at-a-glance

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A variety of new and novel devices are changing the way consumers get their weather -- including such techno items as a weather-forecasting umbrella. The fusion of various objects and technology has sparked much consumer interest by providing the simplest of practical convergent devices.

The Cambridge, Mass.-based company Ambient Devices Inc. is a leading maker of "glanceable" forecasting devices using wireless technology and is winning over praise since its start in the fall of 2001. The company aims not to crowd consumers with a number of features but rather produce objects that are so-called polite technology.

"Ambient devices are a new category of devices, I call them 'calm computing' -- you don't interact with it like a cell phone," said Ambient President David Rose. "These devices allow you to do one thing at a time; it's really pleasant, polite than other electronic devices that require a lot of attention. You'll never be bugged by your orb."

All of Ambient's devices use a wireless solution, the Ambient Information Network and the Ambient Device Design, which creates an infrastructure of back-end service delivery and wireless network and a set of hardware specifications to turn everyday objects into glanceable information devices.

The company, aside from its products, also licenses this technology out to other companies aimed with the same goal such as GPS systems for cars allowing for individuals to know traffic congestion, or LG

refrigerators with weather forecasts.

But their latest anticipated device is the "Forecasting Umbrella" set to debut in summer 2006 and the "E Ink Weather Wizard" this fall.

The Forecasting Umbrella uses proprietary data-radio in the handle, which receives accuweather.com information and pulses when rain is forecast.

Battery-operated, its handle also glows to remind a forgetful individual to take the umbrella with them.

Meanwhile, the E Ink Weather Wizard is a thin display mounted to the wall, refrigerator or used as a bedside clock, and shows the "Atomic time" with current conditions and the five-day forecast, according to the company.

Using batteries, it too connects to accuweather.com, updating the forecasts every hour, using weather icons and giving temperature expectations.

"People have had an anticipatory attitude (for the new devices)," Rose said. "People really want more information about their weather. It's about putting the information exactly in the right place, in a golf bag for golfing conditions or a surfboard that knows waves."

But this is just two of many products however, which includes the 5-Day Weather Forecaster, Executive Dashboard, Weather Beacon and the Ambient Orb.

In particular, the Executive Dashboard, the Weather Beacon and Ambient Orb offer more than just weather forecasts but give individuals the ability to track any dynamic Internet-based information whether it is

stocks or energy prices.

And the last two changes color depending on the information on the Ambient channels ranging from S&P 500, NASDAQ Composite, pollen count, traffic congestions, presidential approval and even gardening, golfing or sailing conditions.

In particular, the weather colors correspond with the standard color-spectrum used on weather maps used by the Weather Channel among others the paging networks.

"Consumer attitudes to convergent devices are dreadful," he said. "The average person is not using their phone for sports scores or watching videos, instead we're looking for devices that don't complicate our lives."

He added, "People would rather have 100 devices that do one thing good, than a cell phone that does 100 things."

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