

Globe Talk: World Cup not so mobile yet

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World Cup fever has been a boom for big business, and not just for those in Germany. From airlines to television networks, the passion of soccer fans worldwide has generated big bucks across the board. What's more, there have been high hopes that the tournament will spur a surge in appetite for new technologies, most notably mobile television.

Certainly, the greater availability of high-quality wireless broadband has been regarded as key in leading to a frenzy of ever more sophisticated mobile gadgets, particularly multi-functioning cell phones that can do so much more than just make phone calls. Mobile broadband has also increased expectations for watching television on the go, too, and many industry analysts have argued that the World Cup would be the perfect global event to heighten interest in the product. In fact, London-based information-technology research group Informa Telecoms and Media reported last week that people in South Korea in particular have embraced mobile TV sets as a means to keep tabs live on their national team's performance wherever they may be. Informa anticipates over 210 million people worldwide watching television on the go by 2011, with 95 million of them based in the Asia-Pacific region.

For now, though, only South Korea and Japan have launched mobile TV on a commercial basis, with South Korea offering it since last summer, while Japan's service became available this March. There are, however, serious efforts to get the format up and running across Europe in particular too. For instance, Finnish mobile group Nokia said this week that in October and December this year it would start offering mobile TV via cell-phone handsets on a trial basis in Sweden. The company has

already conducted similar trials in Britain, Spain and France as well as Finland, and Nokia has concluded that there is "clear consumer demand for such services" in all the participating countries. Meanwhile in Asia, trials are under way in China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, India and Australia.

Still, not all industry analysts are passionate about the prospect of mobile TV. British research group Analysys, for one, has argued that mobile broadcasting will not be financially viable, at least for a while, which in turn may put a damper on developing the technology for mass consumer use. Granted, Analysys acknowledged the growing pressure on mobile operators to provide mobile TV on the part of the customer.

"There is a strong chance that mobile users will not spend a substantial amount on mobile TV and radio services, or video-on-demand and other mobile broadcasting services," said Alastair Brydon, an analyst at Analysys. In particular, he argued that small operators will have very limited choice of viable options, adding that "sharing a broadcasting network with a number of other mobile operators will be essential."

Specifically, European operators are currently looking into a number of potential broadcasting technologies, including digital audio broadcasting-Internet protocol, or DAB-IP; terrestrial digital multimedia broadcasting, or T-DMB; and digital video broadcasting-handheld, otherwise known as DVB-H.

"With a shared network, either DAB-IP or DVB-H could yield attractive returns," Brydon said. Currently, DVB-H is seen as the most popular system in Western Europe and is actually the version that is being tested by Nokia.

So while the latest World Cup match may have boosted public awareness to the possibilities of mobile TV to an unprecedented level, don't expect

a crush of people to flood electronics stores for their personal TV handsets any time soon as they had done during the previous World Cup matches when flat-screen TV sales surged in South Korea and Japan, the host nations that also happen to be at the forefront of producing high-tech consumer gadgets.

Still, some analysts are banking on the upcoming 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing to be the real catalyst for demand for mobile TV. After all, the Olympics have traditionally been a catalyst for innovation in the consumer electronics industry.

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