Will Windows Home Server Be the Next 'Me Too' Market?

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Windows Home Server is Microsoft's bridge between the home PC and the server market. Maybe it's not surprising, then, that its partners and customers may see it as a way to extend into new markets, too.

Microsoft said this week that in addition to Hewlett-Packard, Gateway, LaCie and Medion International will be partnering with Microsoft to develop Windows Home Servers for shipment in the second half of the year.

Although Gateway has dabbled in the server market, Medion and especially LaCie have never sold a server. Several software vendors will also partner with Microsoft to develop their own applications for Windows Home Server, including Diskkeeper, Embedded Automation, F-Secure Corp., Iron Mountain, Lagotek, PacketVideo, RipTopia, and SageTV.

The details surrounding Windows Home Serve have been public since Microsoft chairman Bill Gates announced the product at the Consumer Electronics Show in January, including the specifications . The software, a derivative of the Windows Server platform, allows users to back up data on a central server, and access it remotely as well as locally. Users have also had a chance to play with the beta .

This week, Microsoft announced a $50,000 contest called "Code2Fame" that will reward coders who write plugins for the platform. According to Steven VanRoekel, Microsoft's director of the Windows Home Server

project, one of those plug-ins will include a tool to allow movies to be downloaded to the server and then distributed throughout the home.

That's important, if just for one reason: plug-ins may allow Windows Home Server to take on more of the functionality of the Windows XP Media Center Edition, which was eventually folded into Windows Vista. That may mean that some of the Windows Home Server functionality may be folded into Vista or a subsequent revision, a possibility VanRoekel acknowledged could happen.

"We have looked at that; we may see some of the functionality may get into other products at Microsoft," VanRoekel said. However, for any additional functionality – such as offline backups to a remote server, customers would probably choose the Windows Small Business Server, he said. But here, too, users can add this capability; VanRoekel said he personally remotely backs up his own home server, tweaking its capabilities just a bit.

For hardware manufacturers, the release of Windows Home Server may usher in a new era of me-too boxes, architected by both American and Taiwan firms eager to cash into a new market. For motherboard makers like Asus, for example, expansion into the PC and graphics-cards markets was a natural extension. (The company has not announced plans to build a Windows Home Server box.) Storage-centric companies like LaCie, however, are heading toward the intersection of computing and storage from the other direction.

"This will be an extension of our current products on the underlying PC platform," said Mike Mihalik, the senior engineer for LaCie, based in France. While Mihalik denied that LaCie would be pushing into PCs, he did acknowledge that the company had already shipped an "Ethernet Disk" based on Windows XP Embedded.

"Windows Home Server is a marriage of server technology that's consumer-friendly," Mihalik added.

According to Mihalik, a Windows Home Server is essentially a Microsoft license, a cheap (Pentium 4-class) PC, a hard drive or four, and not much else. "Someone, and I'm not saying it will be us, could come out with a multidisk Home Server for less than $500," he said.

Medion hasn't commented on its plans, other than to disclose that the Medion Home Server will contain storage options of between 500 Mbytes to 2 terabytes, and will offer DLNA-compliant PacketVideo Connect software. It will ship by the end of 2007, the company said.

In his keynote address here, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates indicated that Microsoft will sell "OEM" versions of the software to system builders. Microsoft's VanRoekel conformed that the software will be made available to shops like Newegg.com, where consumers will be able to buy a copy of the software with a token hardware purchase. However, VanRoekel said it was still "too too early" to release even ballpark pricing.

But while the land rush into the graphics-card market and other high-volume markets has been plagued with me-too hardware designs, the Windows Home Server market will likely be differentiated by software plugins, manufacturers say. Whether the additional plugins will be true differentiators or just the bloatware that Apple's latest commercials have mocked PCs for is anybody's guess.

Windows Home Server is based on the .NET language, and Microsoft is already busy adding plugins to the base code, VanRoekel said.

Some of the software partnerships simply leverage the application vendor's relationship to the PC; Diskkeeper's defragmentation software,

for example. Others, such as Riptopia's plans to rip an entire CD collection for use on Home Server and SageTV's Windows Home Server media server software, might end up being specific to the platform. Iron Mountain, meanwhile, has only issued vague plans to "integrate its data protection services with Windows Home Server." An Iron Mountain spokesman declined to comment further.

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