

Economy may be dim, but technological innovation on the horizon for 2009

December 31 2008, By Victor Godinez and Andrew D. Smith

A recession doesn't mean the death of innovation in the consumer tech industry. Consider 2001. During that recession, Apple Inc. introduced the iPod, Microsoft Corp. rolled out its original Xbox video game console, broadband household penetration rates in the U.S. more than doubled from 2000, and Google Inc. was becoming an integral part of modern life.

The pace of innovation isn't likely to falter in this recession, either.

John Donovan, chief technology officer at Dallas-based AT&T Inc., said consumer technology changes so fast that any company that tries to pause is likely to be overrun by its competitors.

"In tough times, I think what happens is you sort of shorten your horizons and raise your bars slightly to make sure that you remain focused and coordinated," he said.

"But you can't abandon the evolution that is such a natural part of the technology. We're not building real estate that lasts 100 years. We're building tangible things, but they transform at a very rapid cycle."

Donovan said that AT&T in 2009 plans to focus on how customers interact with their various electronic devices, letting users seamlessly transfer data among televisions, smart phones and computers all on the same home network.

Check your e-mail on the TV, forward a link to your iPhone of a map embedded in one of those e-mails, and then, while on the road, view a live video feed from a highway camera to see what traffic looks like up ahead.

"Much of that stuff I just described comes together in 2009," Donovan said.

AT&T isn't the only tech company with major new products planned for next year. Here are some of the other cool new products and applications tech buyers can expect to see in 2009:

Femtocells

These little devices are already available to some U.S. cell phone users, but many more should be able to get their hands on these machines in 2009.

A femtocell is like Wi-Fi for cell phones.

A box plugs into your home broadband connection and creates a strong, reliable, wireless cellular network in your house or office.

Sprint Nextel Corp. already offers its Airave femtocell to subscribers.

Other providers are coming soon - AT&T and Verizon Communications Inc. are testing their own devices - and will offer even high-speed 3G coverage, meaning the time of cellular dead spots inside buildings could be coming to an end.

Initial costs are high - you'll have to pay for the machine and a small monthly fee on top of your existing cell phone bill - but those will come down over time.

Laptops

RadioShack Corp. recently rolled out an interesting concept: a laptop with 3G access that's subsidized like a cell phone.

As with a cell phone, though, you have to sign a two-year contract to get the high-speed AT&T 3G Internet connection.

If RadioShack's \$99 Acer Aspire One netbook (normally about \$400) takes off, don't be surprised to see other netbook makers copy the strategy.

Don't be surprised to see more netbooks, period.

Sales of the minilaptops surged from 1 million units in 2007 to an estimated 14 million in 2008, a trend everyone in the computer industry has noticed.

Mobile app stores

The biggest innovation on the mobile front next year probably won't be any one product.

Instead, it will probably be a discovery that millions of smart phone owners are about to make: Software downloads can make phones exponentially more useful than they are out of the box.

The catalyst for this new mindset was Apple, which launched an "App Store" for iPhone owners last summer. Apple's store created a central place where iPhone users can find thousands of programs that can turn their iPhones into everything from electronic books to Breathalyzers.

The App Store's success quickly led to imitators. Google and Research in

Motion Ltd. have already launched similar services for Android and BlackBerry phones, while Palm Inc. has promised an app store of its own early next year.

Expect something similar from Microsoft soon - and expect 2009 to be the year that mainstream users start thinking of cell phones as portable computers that happen to have a voice function.

Windows 7

Whether you love Windows Vista or hate it, a new operating system from Microsoft is a major event in the tech world.

Microsoft hasn't provided a launch date, but most expect the new OS - simply titled Windows 7 - to ship in 2009.

While Windows Vista was a fairly radical overhaul of Windows XP, 7 will be a more incremental change, streamlining and tightening Vista's performance while retaining much of its visual style.

In fact, Microsoft has already promised that Windows 7 will run just fine on those low-power netbooks everybody is buying, a task Vista was never suited for.

LED streetlights

Some of the big innovations to emerge from this downturn may get funded as part of the massive public works projects planned by President-elect Barack Obama.

LED streetlights, for example, could appeal to the new administration because they're about 50 percent more efficient than the high-pressure sodium lamps that are the standard today. They also last much longer and

cast nicer light.

"If you switched all the street lights in the country's 10 largest metro areas to LED, you'd save about \$90 million in energy costs every year," said Keith Ogboenyi, product marketing manager for the microcontroller line at Texas Instruments Inc.

TI chips drive LED lights.

"You'd also cut carbon emissions by 1.2 million metric tons a year," Mr. Ogboenyi said. "That's the equivalent of taking 212,000 cars off the road, and it's the sort of achievement that would seem to appeal to the incoming administration."

Paperless medical offices

On the medical front, observers have long predicted that doctors would abandon paper records for digital equivalents.

The advantages are obvious, but doctors have been slow to make the jump because it didn't make financial sense for them.

Until 2009.

Starting in January, Medicare and Medicaid will pay more to doctors who embrace certain technological improvements that will reduce medical errors and administrative costs.

Electronic prescription systems will be among the first technologies the government pushes. Doctors who use such systems will get a 2 percent bonus from the government. Starting in 2012, those who refuse will get penalized.

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