

Connected security systems tether homes to owners' smartphones

June 1 2012, By Claudia Buck

When Debbie Klava's daughters come home from school in Elk Grove, Calif., she knows the minute they walk in the front door. Even though she's working in an office 90 minutes away, she gets an email or cellphone text when they arrive - or an alert if it's past their expected 3 p.m. arrival time.

And if Mom wants to see her girls' smiling faces, she can call up a five-second video clip on her smartphone or computer screen that shows them schlepping their backpacks through the door.

Klava, credit and collections manager in Comcast's Livermore, Calif., office, is one of the first Sacramento-area residents to log on to the company's new "Xfinity Home" wireless technology system.

It's part of the growing interest in "intelligent home" systems, which let consumers - wirelessly from any location using their computer, tablet or smartphone - check their home's security system, as well as flick on the lights, adjust the heating/cooling, even detect if there's been a water spill under the fridge or an intruder in the bedroom.

"Before having it, our dog was our security system," joked Klava. But as a working couple with long commutes each day, Klava and her husband like knowing their two daughters, 11 and 13, are safely home from school each day.

"It gives me a sense of security. I know (they're) home and don't have

uninvited friends over."

Comcast is not the first to let consumers remotely monitor their homes with cameras and motion detectors. Many home security companies have offered that feature for years.

Nor is it the only company to enable homeowners to save energy by remotely adjusting their heating and air conditioning. Sacramento utility SMUD, for instance, recently announced a mobile [phone application](#) that lets consumers adjust their thermostats from afar.

But in some markets, Comcast may be the first to wirelessly marry home security and [energy savings](#) - accessible from anywhere - via a customer's mobile phone or [computer keyboard](#).

"The connected consumer home is a big topic of conversation among analysts," said William Hahn, principal analyst with technology research firm Gartner Inc., based in Newark, Del. "The technology is moving quite a bit faster than the (consumer) necessarily wants or needs."

The technology, he added, "is ready to go. But the question is: Who wants it and wants to pay for it?"

Comcast and other telecommunications companies like AT&T are betting that consumers do want the interconnected features.

Launched in 2010 as a test market in Houston, Comcast has since spread its XFINITY Home system to markets from Boston to Seattle.

"They need new revenue sources but it doesn't mean this is going to be a successful one," Hahn said. "They're all trying lots of different things - mobile payments, intelligent home systems - to amplify their revenue."

With landlines declining and mobile phone revenue plateauing, companies like [Comcast](#) must "find new sources of revenue growth that can move the needle."

The "brains" of Comcast's system is a small, 5-inch by 7-inch touch screen akin to a tablet computer. In Klava's house, it sits on the kitchen counter, where it's available to the whole family for weather, news updates and games like Sudoku. In addition to traditional 24/7 home-monitoring, the system has panic buttons to summon police, fire or ambulances from a keypad.

Using the keyboard, customers can customize their preferences. Out late and want to delay kicking on your home's air conditioning? Want a text message when your son gets home from soccer? Need a camera view to be sure your new puppy isn't chewing up the sofa while you're at work? Want to randomly alternate room lights in the house while on vacation? Want an alert if you forgot to turn off the slow cooker, curling iron or coffee maker?

All that connectivity doesn't come without a price, of course. The basic package, with 24/7 home surveillance and email/text alerts, is \$30 a month in Sacramento. The premier package, which includes indoor/outdoor cameras, lighting and appliance controls, is \$50 a month.

Installation is extra, as are additional features, like sensors to detect breaking glass, moving curtains or seeping water.

"It's an entirely new business line for us, but it connects so many things we already do," said Bryan Byrd, Comcast's California communications director. "It makes sense because of the investment we've already made in broadband fiber infrastructure. It's already connected and in the ground."

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