Small New Steps Toward Fulfilling the Promise of PC-TV Links

By MATT RICHTEL

LIVE in a Digital Home! Connect All Your Devices! Control Your Media Through a Single Appliance!

In recent years, computer and consumer electronics companies have exclaimed the imminent nirvana that would be a networked union of TV-Internet-stereo-DVD-cable box-speakers-video projector-personal computer. And only one remote control!

Here's the reality: laboriously hook your computer to your TV; watch low-definition photos of the family vacation. (The lack of an exclamation point is deliberate.)

At no risk of hyperbole, the promise of the digital home has fallen desperately short. Hewlett-Packard, for example, says it has independent research indicating that more than half of consumers are interested in using a television to watch the digital content stored on their personal computers — and the Internet. But the consumers connecting their devices still aren't connecting all of them, and those who do are more likely to be the same folks who have advanced engineering degrees and still like to read user manuals at dinner.

And so more modest proposals are upon us. One set of solutions revolves around boxes made by the likes of Apple and Netgear that allow you to store digital media and watch it on your televisions. There are also personal computers, called Media Center PCs, designed to be a conduit between the Internet and the television.

Enter a new set of players: the television makers themselves, like Sony and H.P., who also happen to make PCs. The latest connected-home innovations are televisions designed to pick up a signal from the Internet or personal computers to display videos and pictures.

Instead of set-top boxes, they might be called in-set boxes, or, in the case of Sony’s newest device, a set-back box.

Just rolling into stores now from Sony is its Bravia Internet Video Link, a $299 slender black box that attaches to the back of the company’s 2007 line of high-definition televisions.

The device has an Ethernet cable port for Internet access. Once plugged in, the set then lets you watch a selection of hundreds of clips from a handful of Sony’s Internet partners: Yahoo, AOL and Crackle, Sony’s YouTube challenger. It also provides access to Sony movies and music videos.

Sony says hundreds of videos are available, but among the limited selection shown on the in-store sets are short how-to cooking videos, joke-a-day segments, commentary from firefighters, random clips from...
overseas television and animated shows; in short, the same random assortment of snippets you would find browsing through many online video sites.

But don’t expect to get free-range access to the Internet’s wealth of user-generated content. YouTube? You won’t get it. That limits the service to a tiny fraction of Internet programming.

“This is your grandfather’s Internet,” said Richard Doherty, who analyzes consumer electronics industry trends at Envisioneering, a consulting firm. Or, he said, compared with cable or satellite programming: “It’s like the television from the ’50s and ’60s when you only had a handful of channels.”

Sony says the severe limitations are by design, for a couple of reasons. Primarily, it asserts, it is tough to ensure picture quality and user experience if it allows its customers to download content willy-nilly. Plus, the television maker has not figured out how to create an Internet browser that is easily navigable with the television remote.

Sony says that to get ideal picture quality, a consumer should have an Internet connection that is at least 3 megabits per second, a relatively high speed in most homes, and that could be viewed as yet another drawback to the Bravia Link.

Making the experience as much as possible like television, rather than computing, is a central goal, said Edgar Tu, senior vice president for engineering and TV operations at Sony. He said the company’s research indicates consumers do not want to read on the screen or browse text-heavy sites.

“That’s the bottom line,” he said. “Television is about one thing: video.”

Sony still has a lot to learn about what it wants from a connected TV, Mr. Tu said. That is why, he said, the Bravia Link is also a research tool for Sony; the gadget will communicate through the Internet to Sony, telling the company what model of television people are attaching the device to.

Also, Sony said, its Internet partners will be able to tell it what kinds of shows people are watching, much as they do when people browse the Web.

Another plan for Internet-connected television with access to certain videos is coming from Sharp, according to Bob Scaglione, the company’s senior vice president for marketing in the United States. He said that set could be on the market next year.

“All of the L.C.D. and plasma makers are going to release these types of features,” said Jonathan Weitz, an industry analyst with IBB Consulting. He said that TV manufacturers are doing so partly to cater to consumer tastes, but partly out of fear that they need to add value to televisions to keep their prices up, along with their profit margins.

Hewlett-Packard’s desire to differentiate itself is the reason it is moving to a new generation of connected televisions, called MediaSmart TVs. The latest versions, which came out in late August, are 42-inch ($2,099) and 47-inch ($2,499) L.C.D. sets that let users connect through cables, or wirelessly, to a personal computer.

Through that connection, the television can display video or photos stored on the computer, or it can use it as...
a conduit to download pay-per-view movies from Cinema Now. Eventually, H.P. says, it plans to offer music and video from other content partners.

Some buyers may find it tricky to configure the MediaSmart depending on their computer. H.P. says consumers who have the Vista operating system and the latest Windows Media software should have little configuring to do, while people with less advanced systems may have to install extra software.

Perhaps as an admission that challenges remain, H.P. said it was negotiating with its retail partners to offer a free $200 in-home installation (not including mounting the TV on the wall). That deal would offset about half of the price difference between the MediaSmart TV and like-size H.P. televisions.

The installation deal also “removes any doubt that this will add any more pain than you’ll get with a regular television,” said Alex Thatcher, senior product manager for the MediaSmart TV.

If the case for why consumers should buy a connected TV now is not compelling, it is much clearer why such TVs offer a potentially lucrative business model for the TV makers.

The new sets allow manufacturers to play a bigger role in the distribution of content. That, in turn, would give them another profit stream after the sale. For instance, the television makers could demand a share of advertising or subscription revenue from content partners who are given access to the viewers of their TVs.

That concept, while still in its infancy, is potentially powerful as broadband speeds increase, allowing easier streaming of more data-dense images like HDTV movies or TV programs.

But first, Mr. Tu said, come the baby steps of building a connected home in a way that begins to meet some of the as-yet unmet promise.

“Like every other company, we are trying to figure out how we are going to attack the connected home.”