

Broadband predictions optimistic

The latest figures predict a huge rise in broadband takeup by the end of the year, but is the infrastructure ready?

More than 46 million people worldwide are predicted to sign up to broadband services by the end of this year, according to a report from technology analysts at In-Stat.

"Broadband access technologies continue to make substantial gains in the market place, both in the USA and worldwide," said the report. But In-Stat's estimate seems optimistic and would mean around 16 million new subscribers need to be found within the next five months. Given the difficulties surrounding the rollout of this technology, this seems unlikely.

The report also predicts ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) will become the most popular technology for delivering broadband. But in the US cable modem subscribers still outnumber their ADSL counterparts while the UK's current ADSL infrastructure isn't ready for such a major increase in takeup.

"BT is rolling out broadband faster than ever, with around 12,000 people per week signing up for new services," said a Department of Trade and Industry spokesman. "Broadband providers are also focusing their energy on creating broadband content which will attract even more subscribers."

BT has only enabled a little over 1,100 telephone exchanges since this time last year, making In-Stat's predictions for ADSL

takeup sound overoptimistic at best.

However, BT has recently announced a program of heavy investment to promote broadband, with the aim of signing up 40,000 new ADSL customers.

Those who aren't able to get broadband by conventional means haven't been overlooked either in BT's drive to sign up even more high-speed internet users. The company is currently testing a mesh radio-based broadband solution in Wales. This works by installing a small radio antenna in each house or business which passes data on to neighbouring users' antennae to form a network, doing away with the need for large masts to transmit data to each customer.

PC Advisor will be doing its bit to get the country surfing on broadband next month with our special supplement, *Ditch your dialup*. This will profile the different high-speed internet solutions available and explain the benefits of opting for broadband.



Stone snaps up dregs of Dan

After much delay, a buyer has been found for some of the assets of defunct computer maker Dan – but unfortunately for existing customers their warranties are not part of the deal.

Stone Computers, is part of the OE Group, which supplies computers to the public sector. It has bought Dan's goodwill, intellectual property rights and certain other assets for an undisclosed sum. The company will retain the Dan brand name and will now target the public sector, such as hospitals and the police force.

But Stone has not purchased any of Dan's existing warranties, leaving BDO

Stoy Hayward, Dan's official receivers, desperately trying to sell them off.

BDO has advised Dan customers to hold off submitting warranty enquiries until a third party has been found to deal with them.

"I am aware that many current Dan customers are uncertain about both their warranties and orders," said James Bird, managing director at Stone Computing. "We will be speaking to them as soon as possible with a view to providing solutions for the benefit of both parties."

In reality, while Stone Computers hasn't purchased any of Dan's warranties,



it will honour selected warranties at its own risk, "on a case-by-case basis".

Customers who have paid for goods via credit card but have not yet received them should contact their credit card companies. Those who paid with cash or cheque and are still awaiting equipment should contact BDO Stoy Hayward on 020 7486 5888.

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MSN versus AOL over internet bucks

AOL and Microsoft are to go head-to-head later this year when they both launch new versions of their internet access software. AOL is already touting the beta of version 8.0, while Microsoft is preparing the way to start charging for its previously free MSN service (also to be called version 8.0).

Currently MSN provides users with personalised content, email and the means to customise their web browser window to show information such as weather and stock quotes. Up until now the service has been free, simply requiring you to sign up for a .Net Passport.

Version 8.0 will provide a more comprehensive service, making it a more enclosed environment. This new version will carry a so far undisclosed subscription-based price tag. It will still be free to customers of Microsoft's MSN Internet Service, but customers will have to pay a fee to use the software with internet access from another ISP.

Both AOL 8.0 and MSN 8.0 will offer similar services. Each will include a facility for parental control over their children's internet access. MSN also provides control over the email addresses used, as well as offering weekly reports on children's internet use.



AOL says it has made the controls easier to use in AOL 8.0. Finding out the level of control assigned to each person on their AOL account has been made clearer and parents can adjust the restrictions over the web whether they're at home or at work. The company will also take a leaf out of MSN's book later this year, when it will start issuing 'report

cards' listing websites that a child has visited.

Other new features on offer from MSN include a customisable desktop, called a dashboard, where users can view IM (instant messenger) buddy lists, news, weather, digital images and so on.

Microsoft has also added a natural language internet search facility, which can use entire phrases, rather than one word, as a search input.

AOL has beefed up its own offering with new ways to send music clips, and a You've Got Pictures service for sharing and organising digital images.

So come the end of the year the battle will commence to see whether MSN can poach customers from AOL with its paid-for service. AOL currently has around 34 million subscribers compared to MSN's eight million.

8GB to land on a postage stamp

Olympus and FujiFilm have announced a new type of memory media, which twins a compact design with capacious storage. The xD-Picture Card (xD means extreme digital), is about the size of a postage stamp, but can offer capacities up to 8GB.

The cards are compatible with other camera brands – not just FujiFilm and Olympus models – although it is in these that they will appear first. FujiFilm has already announced three compatible cameras in Japan.

Toshiba will produce the xD-Picture Cards, which will start shipping this month. While Toshiba also holds the trademark for the xD cards, it has not been confirmed when it will release compatible devices, although Olympus and FujiFilm envisage xD being used in devices such as PDAs (personal digital assistants) and audio players, which Toshiba already sells.

With a volume of 0.85cc and a weight of 2g, the xD-Picture Card boasts the



↑ The xD-Picture Card, a new type of memory media released by Olympus and FujiFilm, is roughly the same size as a stamp

smallest form factor of any digital memory card according to John Knauer, Olympus' product manager for the digital consumer products group. Plus its dinky size will enable digital cameras to become even smaller, he said.

Four types of cards will be available initially: 16, 32, 64 and 128MB. Higher capacity 256MB cards are due in December, with 512MB, 1 and 8GB versions planned for 2003. The cards will be priced similarly to SmartMedia according to FujiFilm and Olympus.

Chip gets water bed

Hitachi has announced the commercial launch of its water-cooled notebook PC, which uses its patented water-based solution tank, instead of a fan or fans, to cool down the processor.

"The efficiency of the two systems are about the same but the biggest difference is the noise the latter creates," said Masayuki Akabane, a Hitachi spokesman.

The water-based solution runs through a flexible tube that absorbs heat as it passes over the chip. The solution is then sent to the display part of the notebook to a tank where it cools down. Plastic panels separate the water-cooling elements from high-voltage areas in case of a leak.

The products will be available to corporate users first. The company is looking at market trends before deciding whether to launch the notebooks for the consumer market.



The company says it stumbled across the patent while examining its assets as part of a restructure.

To stake its claim Forgent has launched a 'licensing programme', which it intends to use to extract payment from any company that uses Jpeg compression in its devices. Sony has already paid up what is rumoured to be \$15m (approx £9,600,000) for the Texas-based company's licence.

Patent cases have a way of rumbling on in the US courts for years, and the only affect they have is on the weight of the patent lawyers' wallets. *PC Advisor* predicts that Forgent won't get another penny and Sony may well ask for its \$15m back.

Apple addicts had their big fix from CEO Steve Jobs at his keynote speech at the Macworld, New York expo. But at this year's show there was a treat in store for Windows users too, as Apple has finally released its iPod media player for the PC.

The other new hardware announcement from Jobs was an iMac sporting a 17in landscape flat-panel display. Priced £1,649, the screen is capable of displaying a maximum resolution of 1,440x900 pixels, has GeForce4 MX-based graphics, 256MB of RAM and an 80GB hard drive.

However, it has proved unpopular with Mac users, one of whom vented his spleen on the Macworld.co.uk website, likening Apple to a drug dealer: "Drug dealers give out free drugs then charge once you need it. Sounds very like .Mac email addresses to me."



Due in the third quarter of the year, Move2Mac will shift information such as application preferences, files and folders, from the Windows platform to a Mac one. Pricing has yet to be announced.

If you're making the leap to Mac and don't want to land awkwardly, go to www.detto.com.



By distributing WM9S through Windows, the company aims to make its digital media format the de facto standard, allowing it a leg up in the server software market. "Servers is where the company really makes its money," said Jupiter Media

Still, Microsoft's strength in the operating system market has allowed it to do well with Windows Media. It remains to be seen whether the software leader will be able to wrangle more of the digital media market with its updated platform.



DIY networks will host web of the future

Eventually, enough users will set up WLANs to create a web of interconnected systems that will be “a seamless broadband network built by the people, for the people”, said Nicholas Negroponte, director of the MIT Media Laboratory. However, says Negroponte, before that can happen, governments must free up more spectrum for use by such unlicensed devices.



Early results from *PC Advisor's* Test Centre show the 9000 and 9000 Pro turning in a good performance for budget cards, but the range is not up to nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4600 standards just yet.



Time for new branding



While desktop PC sales remain depressed, computer manufacturer Time has added two new computer brands to its range to drum up more custom. Although the company is currently selling off its stock, it will be offering two new brands – Platina and Colossus – available exclusively from Computer World.

“Colossus and Platina are new brands with different attributes for different consumers,” said Time spokesman Colin Middlemiss. “We have to make different PCs for the different types of consumer that are now in the market,” he added.

The Colossus range will feature low-cost PCs, priced from £399, which can be easily upgraded with new components and peripherals. The Platina range will offer cutting-edge technology to people ‘who want the best’. Time is not worried about customers preferring to buy recognisable brands, believing they are more interested in quality and price.

“The reassurance will come from the fact that [the new brands] are sold by Computer World, a high street expert that knows what its talking about when it comes to PCs,” said Middlemiss.

But customers wishing to get a cut-price deal by buying from Computer World’s online store will have to wait a while, as the company apparently hasn’t had time to sort out a web shopping service.

nForce2 is out



Graphics vendor NVIDIA knows its stuff when it comes to graphics, but if nForce2 is anything to go by it’s also rapidly catching up in the chipset space too. The nForce2 chipset caters for both integrated and discreet graphics, making it

nVidia’s first non-graphics product.

Motherboard manufacturers can choose whether to support integrated graphics or not by choosing either the IGP (integrated graphics processor) or SPP (systems platform processor) chip. This then communicates with the MCP (media communications processor).

The IGP uses a GeForce4 MX core and caters for the budget end of the market. It has multiple display support, TV-out and AGP 8x. The SPP is the performance offering and, as such, doesn’t offer integrated graphics. The dual 64bit memory controllers provide up to 6.4GBps (gigabytes per second) of bandwidth and support 400MHz, 333MHz and 266MHz DDR (double data rate) RAM. There’s also AGP 8x and an 800MBps (megabytes per second) HyperTransport link to the MCP.

Two MCPs are available – MCP-T and MCP Value. The value chip runs to USB 2.0, ATA 133, 10/100 ethernet and AC97 audio. The MCP-T (the T apparently standing for turbo) adds on dual 10/100 ethernet controllers, FireWire and an APU (audio processing unit) capable of Dolby Digital decoding.

Look out for a review on nForce2-based systems in a forthcoming issue.

Intel offers blueprint for media player

In a market where the motto is diversify or die, Intel has got the message and is now working on a blueprint for a portable media player based on its own hardware.

The chip manufacturer plans to develop a device, similar in size to a paperback book, which can play music and video files as well as display images. It will use Intel’s XScale processor, twinned with a 20GB hard drive and a 4in colour display. USB 2.0 and WLAN (wireless local area network) hardware will be built in for connectivity. The device is expected to retail for around £250.

It intends to sell its media player package to electronics companies which can then buy the extra components needed to build the finished device from elsewhere before marketing the players. Although the devices will be equipped with WLAN support, Intel says that it will not be possible to share content between them because of copyright concerns.

The proposed device represents the chipmaker’s second attempt to get a foothold in the consumer PC peripherals market following its decision last year to can its own-brand products, including a media player (pictured), due to disappointing sales.



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V21 touts cheapest broadband

Internet service provider V21 (www.v21.co.uk) has announced a new broadband service that offers fast internet connection for just £19.99 a month. To our knowledge this is the cheapest monthly charge currently on offer, but V21’s connection costs put its overall charges on a par with rival PlusNet (www.plusnet.net). V21 charges £70.48 for installation, whereas PlusNet charges just £58.75.

Wind it up

Freeplay and Motorola have joined forces to launch the Freecharge, a portable energy pack for mobile phones. The pack has a rechargeable battery which can be powered up using the phone’s own adapter and stores up to one-and-a-half times the energy of the phone’s battery. It also has a unique wind-up option that provides a fail-safe power option at all times. The pack will retail at £59.99.

MPs lured online by techno freebies

Plans are afoot to tempt MPs into the technology era with free email filtering software and handheld devices. Many politicians are worried by spam, and this discourages them from making their email addresses public. To overcome this fear it has been recommended that they be issued with free email filtering software, along with free handheld PCs so they can always access their messages.

3D screens without the silly specs

Korean company GTT is to be the first company to offer 3D-look PC displays that require no special glasses to work. The screens will use DVI’s (deep video imaging’s) Multi-Layer Display technology, which uses two physically separate layers of pixels to create the impression of depth. GTT plans to launch two LCD screens using the technology. The company has not said when it will launch in the UK.