delivery on digital

Industry heavyweights are joining forces with the aim of making digital content easier to share. Wendy Brewer hopes it will solve interoperability issues, allowing for truly digital homes

Those of us hankering after a state-of-the-art digital home are often disappointed by the burdensome practicalities of setting up the necessary devices and, even worse, persuading them to work together. Manufacturers have traditionally pursued proprietary standards, sticking to their own areas of expertise and offering no co-operation with other makers of complementary devices. This has only worsened what was already a far from user-friendly situation.

These compatibility issues, twinned with the high cost of home electronics, have put a stranglehold on the market by turning consumers off the idea of the digital home. "[Buyers] want simplicity. We don't want to spend hours fitting ports and downloading software and drivers. We want to plug all our appliances into one hub, sit back and watch them communicate," says a Consumers Association spokesman. Thankfully, it looks as though this scenario has a chance to become reality.

We can work it out

Recognising that simplicity sells, 17 industry heavyweights have joined together to create the DHWG (Digital Home Working Group), a non-profit organisation designed to simplify the sharing of digital content.

Backed by the likes of Microsoft, Fujitsu, HP, Intel, Sony and IBM, the aim of the group is to deliver "technical design guidelines". This would allow companies to develop digital home products that share content through wired and wireless networks in the home.

The DHWG has received praise from several industry associations such as the Internet Home Alliance, Wi-Fi Alliance and research group IDC. "This collection of cross-industry leaders share a common vision and are collaborating to make the connected home a reality," says IDC's Danielle Levitas.

The increase in broadband takeup, coupled with a sales growth in notebooks, PDAs and GPRS mobile phones, means consumers are managing and sharing an increased amount of digital content.

But if interoperability between devices were greater, consumers could enjoy these products even more.

Home sweet home

"[Our] mission is to provide easy-to-use products that are an integral part of people's everyday lives. The backbone of these products and services is built on open standards and interoperability," says Pertti Korhonrnm, executive vice-president of DHWG member Nokia.

The guidelines will use already established standards, such as IP (internet protocol) and Wi-Fi and will be regularly updated to incorporate new standards as they develop. The DHWG also plans to extend its membership so as many products as possible are compatible.

Gartner analyst Van Baker has championed the decision as industry and

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media companies finally recognise the importance of portable media in today's society. Baker believes that interoperability requires a joint effort from device manufacturers and service

providers and they now need to concentrate on creating affordable content that consumers want such as streaming video clips over mobile phones and televisions.

The DHWG plans to develop marketing schemes to educate users about the benefits of a universal platform. It has promised to deliver DHWG-compliant products over the next 12 months.

Whether the DHWG delivers what it promises remains to be seen. Technology consortia formed to unify standards often produce broad woolly guidelines because the individual members are unwilling to give up their own proprietary technology. ∎

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openworld turns

After a year of disappointment for no-frills ISP BT Broadband, the telco giant is repositioning the UK's original broadband service provider, BT Openworld. Guy Dixon finds out why

BT Openworld's decision to totally overhaul its broadband proposition is a final and welcome nail in the dotcom coffin. It represents the beginning of a new era for the UK's most beleaguered ISP brand – often dubbed Openwoe, even by BT insiders. This autumn will see its broadband arm transformed into BT Yahoo Broadband, with its guns trained on a single target: AOL.

The telco's tie-up with Yahoo, one of the internet's biggest brands, means it's all change at BT Openworld's content HQ in Mondial House on the River Thames. Out go the flip charts festooned with navigation nodes, PCs loaded with content management software and the armies of content specialists employees.

BT Openworld's managing director Duncan Ingram assured *PC Advisor* these staff would be snapped up by the rest of the BT empire. But the company has acknowledged that content provision should be left to specialists, allowing it instead to concentrate on what telcos are meant to: ensuring high levels of customer service and billing.

Sitting pretty

BT Yahoo Broadband is also putting some clear water between itself and its poor performing, no-frills, £27-per-month sibling, BT Broadband. (Over the course of the year, BT Broadband has barely achieved a third of its much-publicised target of half a million broadband users.)

Indeed, at just £2.99 per month more than its sister ISP it may well soak up customers at BT Broadband's expense. What's more, by sharing BT Broadband's massive call centre facilities, BT Yahoo Broadband should ditch the poor service record that has hounded it so far.

BT Yahoo Broadband's message is: "We've everything you need for broadband in one package." Need speed? "Well, yes, obviously we've got that." Integrated parental controls, built-in firewall and antivirus software all in place from day one? "Yes, we're offering all those." Anti-spam features, 100MB of web space,
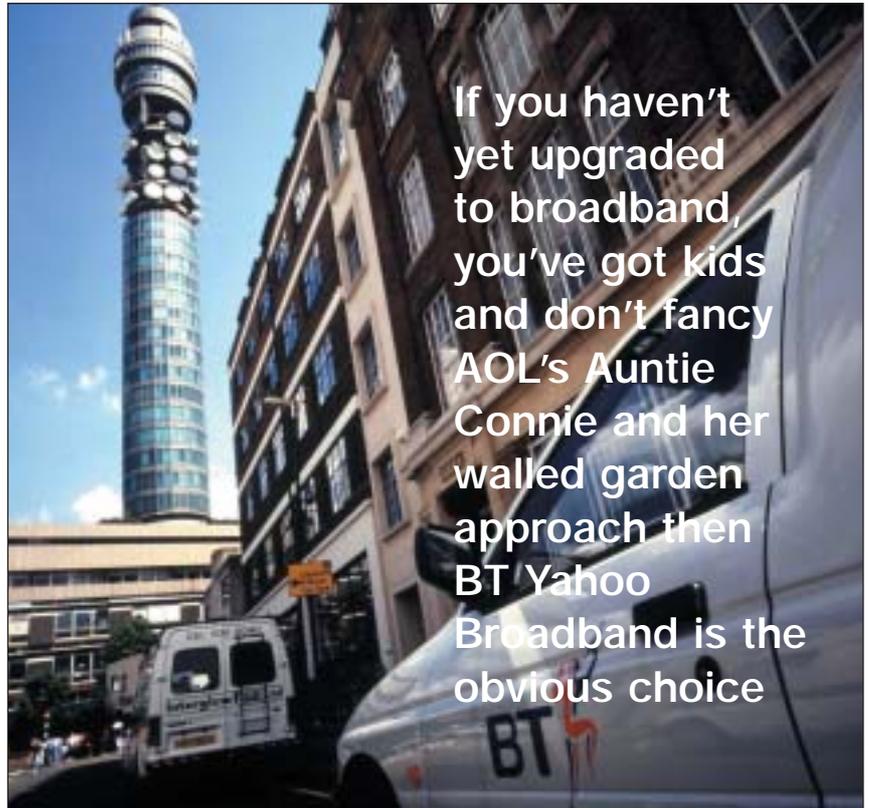
photo album software, pop-up killers and instant-messaging software? "Yes, all here under one roof. And what's more we're going to hold the price at £29.99."

Now as any wily internet user will know, you can get many such features free on the web. You can, for example, download personal firewalls such as BlackIce Defender from the *PC Advisor* website without paying a penny (go to www.pcadvisor.co.uk/downloads). But as Duncan Ingram points out: "You have to know they're there in the first place."

Watch out Connie

The truth is, gathering all these separate components is a hassle for your average internet user. If you haven't yet upgraded to broadband, you've got children and don't fancy AOL's Auntie Connie and her walled garden approach then BT Yahoo Broadband is the obvious choice.

In short, using the internet is a straightforward affair. It's the dangers such as hackers, virus writers and

snoopers – particularly an issue for those who use peer-to-peer fileswapping services – that worry the average punter. And these are concerns that BT Yahoo Broadband can allay in one fell swoop.

Of course, if you want content on top of such features Yahoo sports the kind of portal news, sport and entertainment services that cram the home pages of all the leading ISPs.

Whether or not the arrival of BT Yahoo Broadband will be a key turning point in achieving BT's oft-stated target of five million broadband subscribers by 2005 remains to be seen. It's much more likely that the necessary momentum to achieve such an ambitious target will only happen when the cost of ADSL broadband falls below the psychologically important £20 price point.

In the meanwhile, it is the queen of content and guardian of safe family surfing – AOL's Auntie Connie – who has the BT Yahoo Broadband crosshair trained firmly on the back of her neck. ∎

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