behind the news

Microsoft has finally come out with the long-awaited tablet PC which promises to make using a computer as simple as writing with pen and paper. Wendy Brewer finds out what lies behind the hype

The tablet PC has been heralded, at least by its manufacturers, as the best thing since sliced bread (and in some cases their devices aren't a lot thicker than a slice of bread). These companies are touting the tablet as the technology that will change the way we work, that will make our lives easier and improve the way we interact with our PCs.

With all this hype and the long build-up to the actual launch, the tablet PC has got a lot to live up to. To their credit, Microsoft and the hardware manufacturers have produced, with varying degrees of success, some fairly innovative devices.

Device of note?

The tablet PC concept aims to make inputting data into a PC as simple as using pen and paper and while it might not be quite there yet, it is a whole lot closer than it ever has been before. The large portrait- or landscape-aligned displays making writing onscreen much easier than tapping away on a tiny handheld screen.

"Instead of moving from desk to desk you can walk around taking notes, as you would with a normal paper and pen," said Neil Laver, Microsoft's marketing manager.

But while it's certainly more natural to write like this, tablet PCs are still a darn sight heavier than a paper pad.

Despite an innovative form factor and operating system, the functionality tablet PCs have to offer is nothing new. Most features are already available on high-end PDAs (personal digital assistants) and ultraportable notebooks.

Mad dogs and Englishmen

These shortcomings could mean there aren't quite the compelling reasons to buy tablet PCs as their backers would hope, particularly given their high cost and sometimes less-than-perfect design.

HP, Toshiba and Fujitsu, all of whom have launched tablet PC models, anticipate that they will make up around one third of their notebook sales by 2003. But analysts at Gartner estimate this

"A lack of application support, plus clumsy hardware designs and a price premium will be barriers for most potential tablet PC users"

Ken Dulaney, Gartner Group

figure is likely to be closer to one percent. "Tablet PCs will have a natural fit in many vertical applications that currently use pen-based PCs. However, a lack of application support, plus clumsy hardware designs and a price premium, will be barriers for most users," said Ken Dulaney, vice president and research director at Gartner.

Even manufacturers admit that price is a problem. "The price tag is a barrier, but as with all new technologies prices drop rapidly within months, at the moment it's too expensive for the average buyer," admitted a spokesman at Acer.

Gartner believes the main market for the tablet will be businesses rather than consumers. "Early purchasers are likely to be 'heat seekers' who always gravitate to new technology and high-level managers looking for 'executive jewellery' to exhibit their technology savvy," said Gartner's report, *Tablet PC is coming, but slowly.*

The next let down is lack of power. Acer's TravelMate C100 uses an 800MHz

Pentium III and sports a price tag of almost £1,500 while, in comparison, Multivision's Visage notebook offers a 1.8GHz P4 processor for under £1,000, which means shelling out a hefty sum for the benefit of pen-and-ink technology.

Fighting to succeed

To make the tablet PC the success it so clearly wants it to be, Gartner analysts say Microsoft needs to do more work on the Digital Ink part of the Tablet PC operating system, making it easier to use and more integrated with Windows applications.

As with all new technologies only time will tell if the tablet PC will be a success or failure, and it will depend on how well it fares with core corporate customers. It may take a while for it to bed down in this market, so vendors should hold their fire before making a final judgement. ■

behind the news

Text messaging has already taken the high street by storm, but now it looks to be doing the same for the sofa as television companies encourage us to send in votes and views via our mobile phones. Wendy Brewer looks at why SMS-TV is proving such a hit

While over-hyped WAP (wireless applications protocol) technologies failed to make any real impact on the mobile sector, SMS text messaging has unexpectedly become the industry's major success story. During September 02, around two million text messages were sent every hour, according to figures from the Mobile Data Association.

Today TV companies are hoping to cash in on the text boom, developing SMS-TV, which allows viewers to submit votes and opinions via text messages. With reality TV programmes such as *Popstars* and *Big Brother,* texting provides a real opportunity to get the audience involved in the outcome of a programme, something that other forms of iTV (interactive television) have so far failed to do.
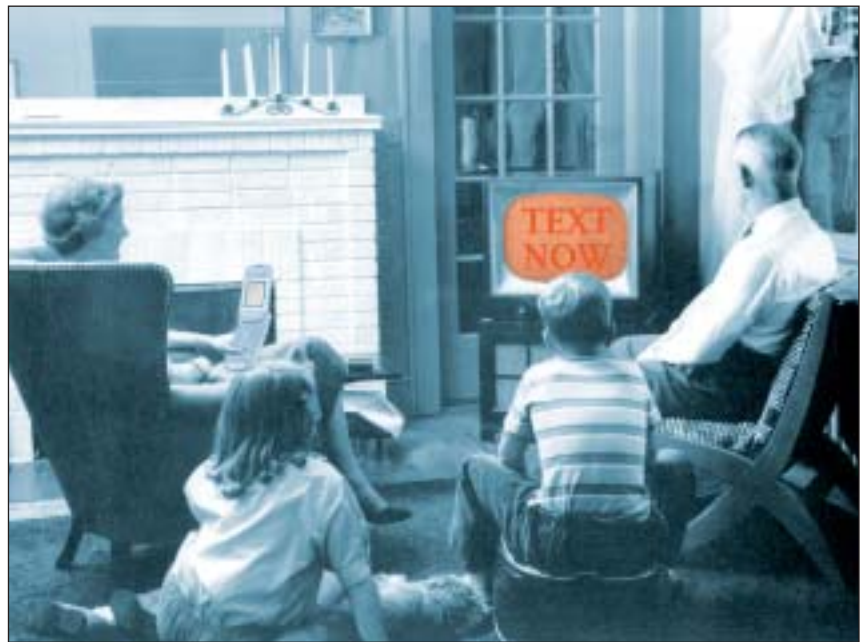
Answrs on a pstcrd?

There was a time when any self-respecting TV programme displayed an email address along the bottom of the screen to encourage the audience to get in touch, but this has now been replaced by four- or five-digit text message numbers. These so-called 'short codes' are provided by each operator and, unlike WAP, operators are actually co-operating to ensure the codes work across all networks.

As well as making it even easier for viewers to get in touch, this has the added benefit of earning TV companies plenty of extra revenue, as you have to pay to text, whereas emailing is free.

Production company Endemol Entertainment capitalised on this trend during its reality TV show *Big Brother 3* with great success. In the UK, the series received over 6.6 million SMS votes which accounted for a significant proportion of the £5m-plus revenue generated by the programme.

Despite the cost of texting, viewers aren't put off sending an SMS to their favourite show. Freelance documentary producer James Samson believes this is because "people feel as though they are having their say, as though their input really counts. It's not about delivering content, but providing a basis for content that the viewer's input decides".

Race to pick up

The problem for both users and operators is the sheer number of messages sent at certain times, often blocking the networks completely. "There have been occasions when radio stations have run competitions without bothering to let us know, which has simply caused havoc. If we have advance warning then we can prepare the network for the boom," said a spokesman at network operator Vodafone.

However, Endemol has started building its own database of mobile users and the next step will be to establish direct billing with viewers, allowing it to bypass operators altogether. This isn't likely to please the operators, as they take around 40-50 percent of the revenue from each message, which is often charged at premium rate. The rest is divided between the programme makers, the company responsible for the text service and the broadcaster, so we can probably expect some resistance to TV companies taking over.

Days of phone numbered

Despite the obvious benefits of SMS-TV from a revenue perspective and its popularity among the viewers, analysts are divided over its future. Research firm Strategy Analytics predict that enhanced TV applications, such as voting and programme participation, will account for 48 percent of the market by 2008.

But analysts at Van Dusseldorp and Partners believe that the next two years will see the peak of SMS-TV applications. "From 2004, the rollout of MMS and J2ME services and devices will reach significant levels to compete with SMS for television interactivity, particularly in terms of 'pushed' premium," claims its report *Interactive Television Reinvented*.

But whether or not its future is bright, there are lessons to be learnt from the success of SMS-TV, relying as it does on easy-to-use technology and seamless integration with popular devices that have already been widely adopted by the mass market. ■

behind the news

Microsoft is driving to push the PC off your desktop and into the kitchen, the lounge – even the bedroom if you so choose – with its Windows Powered Smart Displays. Ursula Seymour takes a peek at the software giant's vision of the future

Microsoft has been in the news a lot recently thanks to the much trumpeted launch of the tablet PC (see page 139). But this is only one strand in its drive to get the PC off your desktop, and into every room in your home. While the tablet PC is aimed primarily at business users, the new Windows Powered Smart Displays, devices formerly known as Mira, target home users.

The devices, which will be made by a range of hardware partners, are essentially wireless-enabled displays which allow you to use all the features of your desktop PC from any room in the house via an 802.11b wireless network. For example, you could download recipes in the kitchen or listen to streamed digital audio in the living room, all without the PC leaving the spare room.

A new look
Microsoft Europe, Middle East and Asia product manager Nancy Nemes describes Smart Displays as the "evolution of the monitor". She says that with the Smart Displays, the company is "looking to create a new device category, like Pocket PC or smartphones".

At launch, which is slated for the first quarter of 2003, there will be two form factors: 15in and 10in. Microsoft anticipates that the larger model will be used as a primary display and undocked for use away from the desktop, while the 10in unit will act as a second, remote mobile monitor. Many more form factors are expected to emerge in the future, said Nemes.

So far the only manufacturer to unveil details of its Smart Display devices is ViewSonic. It plans to launch both a 10in and a 15in model, the V110 and V150 respectively, early next year.

Split personality
All Windows-powered Smart Display devices run Windows CE .Net and require Windows XP Professional's remote desktop management feature, which will force XP Home users to upgrade. Nemes says that its partners will bundle the upgrade to XP Pro with the devices, along with a wireless USB hub to help them set up their network.

Pricing will be set by Microsoft's partners, which include Toshiba, NEC, Philips, ViewSonic, LG and Fujitsu, but Nemes says it's likely to be around $800-$1,000 (£500-£650). ViewSonic has set pricing for the V110 at $999 (£628) and the V150 at $1,299 (£817), slightly higher than Microsoft anticipated. As yet UK costs have not been announced.

This pricing puts it in the same range as a low-cost notebook, but without the functionality. Nemes says Microsoft doesn't see this as an issue as the Smart Displays are not intended to compete with laptops despite their relatively similar form factor and portability.

"[A Smart Display] is a peripheral, it is not intended to be instead of a laptop. If you want to take a computer out of the house, then get a notebook. If you want to wirelessly access your data all over the house, then a Smart Display is better," says Nemes. She also points out that thanks to the lack of local processing power, the Smart Display can be both light and cool.

The long view
The Smart Displays are designed to appeal to early adopter home users – "super users" in Microsoft-speak. The company says its research shows there are 64.2 million super users in its top five markets: Japan, US, Germany, UK and France. When it surveyed 5,000 super users in the US, it found that 86 percent were interested in Smart Displays.

Nemes admits that the largest uptake will probably be in the States, where it is forecast that by 2005 two million homes will be wirelessly networked. It may be harder to sell the concept in the UK, however, where the projected figure is just 1.2 million by 2003.

While in its current format a Smart Display is useless without a powered-up desktop PC, future versions may include more onboard features, such as local storage or MP3 players.

Many of the devices that launch next year will include built-in speakers so you can listen to music streamed from a desktop PC. In fact the only activity you can't port from your desktop to the display is 3D gaming, as the bandwidth provided by 802.11b is not great enough. ■