news

BT goes all PC

BT is promising to take the pain out of buying a PC for the home with the launch of BT Home Computing. Under the deal, the telco gives customers a full package including a PC, home setup, round-the-clock support and a broadband connection.

Offering a choice of HP and Toshiba models, BT hopes to simplify buying the right PC. "Choosing and using a home computer shouldn't be the stressful experience it clearly is. To help customers get the most out of technology and communications we've made it easy for them to choose the right PC with minimum hassle," explains Angus Porter, MD of BT Retail's consumer division.

It provides eight packages aimed at various budgets and types of user. Pricing starts from £35.99 per month for three years for the basic HP desktop with a 1.8GHz Celeron processor. Windows XP Home and Works Suite 2002 software are bundled with the package and ethernet and ADSL modem are built in, so the machine is broadband ready though the monthly payment for a broadband package isn't included in the price. This adds up to £1,295 over 36 months.

But a visit to Dell's online store offered us the opportunity to buy an identically specified PC with a three-year next-day onsite support warranty, home installation and free delivery for £837. You would have to add on around £100 for software and an ADSL modem, should you want one, but that's still quite a saving on what BT is charging.

You can buy the BT package outright at a cheaper £781 but you must add £9.99 a month for support on to this, regardless of the fact that BT admits the PCs may already be covered by a manufacturer's guarantee. This adds up to £360 for three years, pushing BT's price up to £1,140 – over £200 more than Dell's.

BT claims that it offers a hassle-free experience and the best value for money. "It's not just about the hardware, but the service wrap that comes with it," says BT spokesman, Damian Peachey.

Call 0800 800 832 or visit www.bt.com/homecomputing for further information.

Broadband for all, sometime soon

The broadband revolution continues. But while the government finally has cause to congratulate itself, BT has less to celebrate.

Thanks to an investment of £280m, the government managed to hit its target of getting 6,000 online centres up and running by the end of 2002. These centres provide those from poorer backgrounds with access to the wide range of content broadband can provide.

The government has identified education institutions as the next in line to be hooked up to high-speed internet. "More powerful software and content-rich multimedia is being developed, which provides the means to really engage learners and increase the effectiveness of ICT [information and communications technology] in raising standards. But schools need broadband to access these," said Ivan Lewis, minister for adult skills and learning.

And schools aren't the only institutions left out by broadband, as BT is still dragging its heels over upgrading exchanges to enable home users to sign up for ADSL. Despite receiving over 200,000 names from its registration scheme, the telco has upgraded just one exchange since the scheme started on 1 July 02.

Things may be looking up though as BT has now committed to speed up the rollout: "We are upgrading 17 more exchanges as we speak and hopefully will gain enough interest to see all of the exchanges listed eventually upgraded," says a spokesman at BT.
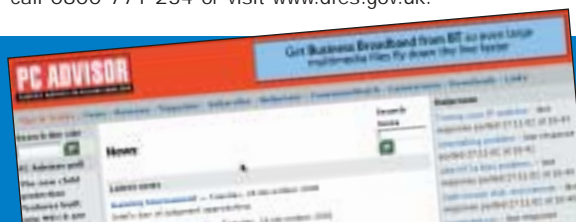
Based on the current momentum, BT believes it will rollout its services to around 80 percent of households by the end of 2005.

For details of your nearest broadband centre call 0800 771 234 or visit www.dfes.gov.uk.

Daily news at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/news

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MP3s beat CDs

A survey by research firm Comshare Networks confirms the music industry's worst fears, revealing that online sales of audio CDs have fallen by 39 percent from this time last year.
The rise in popularity of P-to-P (peer-to-peer) file sharing sites, like Kazaa and Morpheus, is matched by a corresponding sharp decline in the purchase of physically recorded media. This shift poses a serious threat to the music industry, which has been slow to exploit the popularity of digital audio files.

And this is no slow fall in sales. Year-on-year 2002 online music sales fell 12 percent in the first quarter and 28 percent in the second quarter before diving 39 percent in the third quarter. This has led to a cut in sales revenue from $730m (£464m) to $545m (£346m) since 2001. In contrast, the P-to-P sites are doing better than ever. Both Kazaa and Morpheus had under a million monthly users in the US in June 01, but by March this year Kazaa had 5.8 million users, while Morpheus boasted 7.2 million.

The music industry has taken steps to shut down the sites, using legal measures in an attempt to put them out of business in the way it drove Napster to bankruptcy. But thanks to the different technology used, neither site actually stores the files as Napster did, instead merely providing a means for individuals to share them. The present generation of P-to-P services have proved to have greater staying power.

While it is no surprise that the steepest fall in sales should be seen online, where web-savvy users are most likely to investigate P-to-P sites, the Riaa (Recording Industry Association of America), said it saw a fall of seven percent in overall CD shipments for the first half of 2002. Riaa President Cary Sherman said: "Cumulatively, this data should refute any notion that illegal file sharing helps the music industry."

Mobile operators cash in

As handset sales remain stagnant across Europe, operators are finding new ways to drag themselves back into the black and justify the investment they made in next-generation technology.

Last month's launch of Orange's Smartphone-based SPV was the tip of an iceberg of initiatives aimed at squeezing as much revenue as possible out of existing customers by attempting to turn them on to multimedia apps.

Vodafone has launched its Live mobile internet service this month, with features like

chat, polyphonic ringtones, games and email. As handsets are priced at £200 upwards and costs range from 36p for a picture message up to £5 for games, there's the potential for Vodafone to clean up. Elsewhere, T-Mobile has just signed a deal with Sony Pictures to bring movies to our mobiles. The agreement will let its customers download movie-related content including clips, pictures, theme-tune ringtones and specially created Java games. Pricing is steep and the content is aimed at 18- to 24-year-olds in a clear attempt to cash in on their mobile and text addiction.

MY TECHNOLOGY
Stelios Haji-Ioannou

Q. Mac or PC? Which do you use and why?

A. PC because there's more choice and more competition and therefore better pricing. Also, I do more word processing than design or working with images so I find a PC more suitable.

Q. When did you last get angry with a piece of technology, and why?

A. I don't think I get angry with technology and I think people in general almost expect technology to go wrong or break down from time to time. On the rare occasions when the system goes down in one of my internet cafes it is always interesting to see how calm and accepting the customers remain. This contrasts with the immediate anger shown by passengers if their flight is delayed.

Q. If you could invent a technology device for the future, what would it be?

A. Either teleportation to make international travel faster or a system by which I could receive and send emails directly to and from my brain. Actually, it's quite lucky that I haven't invented either as the former would put easyJet out of business and the latter would put easyInternetCafe out of business.

Q. What technology product couldn't you live without and why?

A. The internet. The easyGroup has based all its office software on the net so I can access all parts of my office from any web browser in the world.

Q. What's your favourite home page or website and why?

A. I regularly visit sites like yahoo.com and bbc.co.uk in order to stay in touch with what's happening in the world.

Stelios Haji-Ioannou is founder of a number of companies, including easyGroup, easyInternetCafe, easyJet, easyMoney, easyCar, easyValue and Stelmar Tankers (www.stelios.com).

Comdex special

Clash of the PDAs

The hot topic at the Comdex IT show in Las Vegas this November was portable computing. This was no surprise, coming as it did so soon after the launch of Microsoft's Tablet PC OS.

But not everyone was as enamoured of the tablet concept as Bill Gates would like. Indeed, Dell shunned the tablet PC in favour of what it sees as the more lucrative PDA (personal digital assistant) market, choosing Comdex as the launchpad for its long-awaited Axim PDA.

With the Axim it aims to offer customers a Pocket PC solution at a more affordable price – it starts at just $199 (£126) for a 200MHz XScale model with 32MB of RAM, ramping up to $299 (£190) for a 400MHz version with 64MB of memory. As yet UK pricing for the device hasn't been set, but Dell says it will be "cheaper than the competition". It is due for launch here in early 2003.

Talking of the competition, rival HP was keen to steal Dell's thunder with its iPaq h1910, also launched at the show.

In fact both were used as props by Bill Gates during his keynote speech as he hailed the new generation of affordable, or should we say reasonably priced, Pocket PC devices.

The iPaq can't quite match the Axim at the entry level, but its higher-end version costs the same at $299. Its specifications aren't quite as impressive, though, with a 200MHz XScale processor and just 46MB of user-accessible memory. A UK launch has yet to be confirmed, but if it does reach our shores it will also be in early 2003.

HP's iPaq might be compact at 70x113x13m, but there was an even smaller PDA on display at the show: Fossil's Wrist PDA, a watch that can run the Palm OS. It features a touchscreen, a stylus built into the strap, 2MB of memory, an infrared port and all the standard Palm applications including address book, date book and memo pad. It will go on sale in mid-2003.

Graphics get real

Graphics company nVidia has unveiled its latest offering to hardcore gamers, the GeForce FX, which it hopes will deliver its dream of 'cinematic computing' to the desktop PC. The GeForce FX (previously known as NV30) packs in a massive 125 million transistors and runs at 500MHz. To keep up with the processor, it uses the new DDR2 (double data rate) memory, providing a 1GHz memory data rate.

According to figures supplied by nVidia it offers a significant performance boost compared to its current flagship,

the GeForce4 Ti 4600. Running Quake III at a resolution of 2,048x1,536 resulted in a massive 173.1fps (frames per second) verses 93.9fps for the GeForce4. It can stand its ground with new games, too, racking up 49.8fps in Doom III at 1,280x1,024. The GeForce4, on the other hand, only stretched to 20.9fps.

Running a chip at 500MHz isn't going to produce the coolest operating environment. With this in mind, the FX Flow cooling system intelligently monitors the chip's temperature and draws in air to cool it down.

OFF THE CUFF

by Will Head

Honey I shrunk the trade fair

Comdex was understandably depleted in 2001 but rather than bounce back to prosperity this year it has shrunk further still, casting doubts over its future.

Arriving at the Las Vegas Convention Centre gives the first clue that things are a bit subdued – the expanse of marquees in the parking lot, necessary last year due to lack of space inside, has been replaced by a solitary tent. Here you can experience the wonder that is Microsoft's Smart Display.

The Comdex expo itself fills just two halls and companies like nVidia are noticeably absent from the show floor

The expo itself fills just two halls and companies like graphics giant nVidia are noticeably absent from the show floor, choosing to operate from the comfort of a hotel suite instead.

Bill Gates was back to kick off proceedings with an address to a fairly packed audience at the MGM Grand, but his speech markedly lacked details of anything particularly new or exciting save OneNote, a note-taking application. The Microsoft boss also avoided any fancy dress, obviously feeling unable to top last year's take on the boy wizard Harry Potter.

The future of Comdex is further clouded by rumours that its organisers, Key3Media, may be filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The company is apparently withholding comment until after the show.

If things continue on their current trajectory the feeling is that Comdex could end up as an addendum to January's CES (Consumer Electronics Show), also staged in Vegas, rather than an event in its own right.

ADSL wannabes falsify figures

B T Wholesale's registration scheme, which enables users to register their interest in broadband services, is being exploited by a small number of people who are falsely registering details in order to boost so-called 'trigger figures'.

The company requires 200-500 people to register in each area before it will upgrade an exchange to support ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line). So far it has upgraded just one exchange, Todmorden in Lancashire, as a result of the scheme, though it has just approved a further 16 upgrades. But when one undisclosed ISP passed BT the details of hundreds of interested registrants in Wrexham North, it discovered that one person had registered over 200 times.

"We noticed a large number of entries with consecutive [phone] numbers," said a BT Wholesale spokesman. "This was a fairly unsophisticated attempt and we spotted it before the entries had been entered into our official database."

The Wrexham North figures will be reset to the lower level, with the false entries removed. There is also concern over some of the entries for Knaresborough, Yorkshire.

The broadband registration scheme can be accessed online at www.broadband1.bt.com/getting_broadband/bb_avail_and_reg.asp?t=4.

Dinky desktop from Dell

D ell believes small is beautiful with the OptiPlex SX260, which at 50 percent smaller than the company's current OptiPlex machines is its tiniest desktop to date.

The PCs are designed to take up less space on the desk than current computers and can be placed either horizontally or vertically. Roughly square in shape, measuring 247x241x85mm, they weigh just 3.5kg – not much more than a notebook.

Continuing with the space-saving theme, an optional flat-panel display is available with a companion bracket that acts as the monitor stand and doubles up as a stand for the main PC, meaning the two take up even less desk space.

Dell has reduced the OptiPlex SX260's size even further by removing features like PCI or AGP slots, which means you can't connect your own graphics cards or other add-in cards.

There is also no floppy disk drive as standard but these are the first models to support booting from USB memory keys. Dell plans to launch such a device in November 02 and expects the higher reliability and storage capacity will make them more popular than floppy disks for booting machines.

A typical OptiPlex SX260 configuration will sell for £629. This includes a 2GHz P4 processor, 128MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, 40GB hard drive, 24-speed CD-ROM, integrated graphics and network adapter, 17in CRT monitor, Windows XP Professional and a three-year warranty.

Games galore

S ony is to join Microsoft in charging players for online gaming through its PlayStation2 console. It plans to launch its online forum next spring, around the same time as Xbox Live. It will kick off in the UK and will then roll out to key European countries.

Users will not be expected to pay a monthly subscription fee, but they will have to pay a one-off charge of £44.99 for a broadband gaming pack. Once connected, subscribers can enter the forum as many times as they wish. The pack will include an ethernet adapter to make the console internet-ready, an online game and a startup disc.

Sony has around a dozen online games in the pipeline, from both its in-house team and external developers, including Eidos and Electronic Arts.

But console gaming isn't ideal for everyone and is particularly hard for blind players. Recognising this, students from The Netherlands have developed a PC driving game, called Drive, designed for visually impaired players.

The game brings all the fun of a racing game alive through sounds rather than graphics. The aim is to drive a test vehicle as quickly as possible while overcoming aural objects in your path, such as the irritating comments of backseat driver Bob. There are no visuals onscreen, just the game's title, so players are entirely dependent on audio clues for success.

The game is available as a free download from drive.soundsupport.net.

Powerful solutions

As mobile computing becomes more prevalent and offers higher performance, coming up with a portable, long-lasting way to power devices is the question that is taxing developers. At the same time as wireless working becomes a reality, cable-free charging is the next logical step.

One method that might prolong batteries is fuel cell technology, which increases the power tenfold. A fuel cell is a device that converts hydrogen and oxygen into electricity and heat. It resembles a perpetually recharging battery and would actually slide into a standard-size battery to recharge it. Because the rechargeable element is a small cartridge, users could ditch their extra battery units and AC adapters and carry cartridges instead.

US company Neah Power Systems is setting the stage for what it considers the next way to power electronic devices. Its technology uses methanol, which has several advantages as a fuel according to director of product marketing, Gregg Makuch, as it's powerful, inexpensive and environmentally friendly.

It's not yet clear how fuel cells will be used in notebooks or other portable devices, but the technology is drawing interest because of its longevity. The cells could either lengthen the time a digital device can run, or run more powerful devices than batteries can now support. But Neah Power says that realistically it will be three years before we see fuel cell-driven PCs on the market.

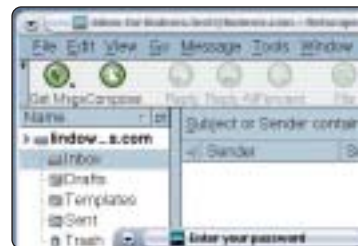A technology that is far more imminent is cable-free charging units and two companies on either side of the Atlantic have come up with solutions to this dilemma. Splashpower, a UK company based in Cambridge, has developed a module that can fit in mobile devices and will charge them simply by placing the device near a recharge pad.

MobileWise is working on a similar solution to actually power devices. The US-based firm, which expects to ship products early next year, has developed a pad (pictured) with a conductive surface capable of powering compatible devices as efficiently as if they were plugged into an electrical outlet, by simply resting them on top of it. It believes this will do away with power cables altogether, which may enable mobile device users to finally to cut the cord.

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News in brief

New OS on the block

Lindows.com has fired a further salvo in its war against Windows with the launch of the latest version of its Linux-based operating system, LindowsOS 3.0. It's hoping to win over the mass market with version 3.0's low cost and compatibility with Windows file formats. The company is offering the new OS at $119 (£75) if downloaded from www.lindows.com – a bargain compared to £160 for Windows XP Home or £231 for XP Pro. Buying Lindows also provides customers with access to hundreds of free software applications, putting it further ahead of Windows in terms of cost.

Multifunction mobile

The clever folk at Nokia have come up with a phone that makes sending text messages even easier. On first inspection the 6800 looks much like any other handset, but it unfolds to reveal a full Qwerty keyboard. The phone supports GPRS (general packet radio service) so it handles email as well as text messages. It can also be used for multimedia messages, thanks to the colour display.

AOL for Mac OS X

Over a year after the launch of Apple's Mac OS X, AOL has released a compatible version of its internet access software. As well as all the standard features, several Mac-specific extras have been added, including support for the Netscape Gecko browser, QuickTime, iChat and AirPort wireless networks. The look and feel has also been tweaked to mimic the OS. AOL for Mac OS is available for download at AOL Keyword: Mac OS or, for Mac-based AOL users, Keyword: Upgrade. Alternatively, a CD can be requested by calling 0800 376 5432. All current Mac AOL users will be sent the CD automatically.