Digital reality = digital hype?

You are going to hear the term 'digital lifestyle' more frequently over coming months as every marketeer that has a technology product or service to sell scampers aboard the consumer bandwagon. Be wary, says Andrew Charlesworth

Big companies used to be where computer suppliers made their profits, but since the dotcom crash businesses have decreased their IT spend significantly. Individual consumers, however, show none of this wariness and drive the economy with credit-fuelled bingeing.

So consumer electronics is the new business and some of the world's biggest technology companies are looking to cash in. Murdoch wants £400 a year from Sky viewers for Sky+. Dell is moving into LCD TVs – you'll be upgrading every three years. Microsoft's Bill Gates wants a PC in every room of every home and to own the nervous system that binds them.

Buying in to the dream
So what is this so-called digital lifestyle? If only there were a single product we could tell you to buy that would give you the digital world on a plate: "Buy xyz and you will have a digital lifestyle". There would be no need for this supplement to *PC Advisor*. But, of course, life isn't that simple. No single product encapsulates the essence of the digital world, not even Microsoft's much-hyped Media Center PC. No single brand will deliver a digital lifestyle, not even Sony's array of classy consumer goods.

But there are some underlying technologies without which the digital world is difficult to envisage. Broadband internet access, for example, turned the internet from the frustratingly slow single-minded forays to send and retrieve email or run a Google search into the delivery mechanism for digital content that runs the full gamut.

Another technology is wireless networking. This enables devices in the home or office to share digital content so it can be feasted upon at the consumer's convenience, not as dictated by the limitations of the appliance receiving the content. And wireless connection to the internet means our experience of digital media is not housebound. Content can be plundered and enjoyed outside the home or office.

Arguably, the third pillar of the digital world is software that provides plug-and-play connection within this wireless network. This means that devices can be added and subtracted at will without fiddling with the innards, without a PhD in cybernetics and without a sockethead screwdriver.

While BT, Telewest and NTL are part way to providing the first of these pillars and Microsoft XP is a big step towards providing the third, the second pillar – wireless networking – is still very immature.

No strings
Wireless networking is the area with the greatest number of vendors shouting for the attention of a small number of customers. The market is still in a bewildering state of flux, which is why this supplement is largely devoted to the issues of wireless networking.

While broadband internet access provides the delivery mechanism for digital content, wireless networking provides the freedom to consume it almost anywhere in the home, office or outside. We say 'almost anywhere' because, despite what some ads would have you believe, clearly you cannot use a wireless notebook on a Thai beach, in the South American rainforest or while hiking in the Alps. Unless, of course, you are within range of a Wi-Fi network, in a GPRS (general packet radio service) cell or in possession of an inordinately expensive proprietary satellite downlink whose 25m base station dish is conveniently just out of picture.

Anyone who says otherwise is trying to sell you a pup or, at least, a theoretical digital utopia that is unfeasible with today's technology.

Shaping the technology
You can understand the enthusiasm of computer people for Wi-Fi hotspots. In the mid-1990s pundits were issuing dire warnings that we would become a non-society of recluses. Our work, entertainment and communication would come to us over the web. We'd bury our heads in our screens and never go out.

But instead of letting the technology shape us, we changed it to suit our lives and can now take the internet out with us.

Tomorrow it might be automatic and natural to do so, but today it is inconsistent and takes some effort.

Tomorrow there might be so many overlapping Wi-Fi hotspots that you can walk around any town with a PDA in a permanent 'cloud' of internet connection. Today, Wi-Fi hotspots are confined to places where people who want wireless connection congregate and where that desire can be turned into monetary value by service providers.

The computer business is very good at selling tomorrow. It's making today work that needs patching. But there's more to wireless networks than a hotspot latte with GPRS-filled croissant to go. They have a big impact in the home too.

The digital home is not about replacing your hi-fi and TV with a PC, even if that does suit Microsoft's plans. It's about integrating these things so you can enjoy video on a decent TV monitor from the comfort of your sofa, even if that video originated on the PC.

It's about playing music on your hi-fi even if it is in MP3 format on your PC's hard drive. It's about looking up a recipe on the web from a notebook in the kitchen and ordering replacement ingredients online while the oven heats up. It's about deciding to go out and looking up the train times or the traffic news on your PDA while you shave in the bathroom.

Tomorrow today
Before Wi-Fi this lifestyle meant having the PC connected with cable to – and therefore probably in the same room as – the hi-fi and TV. It meant running cable from your internet-connected PC to a notebook in the kitchen. And forget the PDA in the bathroom. Pre-Wi-Fi you would have run between the spare bedroom, where the dialup PC sat, and the bathroom, clicking on rail timetables while peeling your face or legs (depending on your sex or preference) with a razor.

You see, a digital lifestyle isn't about technology for its own sake. There isn't really any such thing as a digital lifestyle except in the minds of marketing people. But there are technologies and products that when connected together become 'more than the sum of the parts – and you can make them work for you. This is the digital world. ⊠