TECHNICAL COLUMNS

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DOES CABLE NEED ITS OWN GEEK SQUAD?

By RON HRANAC

What comes to mind when you hear the term "home networking"? Installing one or more cable outlets in a subscriber's home? Installing a cable modem and connecting it to a subscriber's personal computer (PC)? Hooking up several PCs to a cable modem using Category 5 (CAT-5) Ethernet cable, or maybe an 802.11 wireless access point?

For the most part, it involves the latter: Hooking up multiple PCs to a cable modem with wired or wireless technology, allowing those PCs to access the Internet via a single high-speed connection. Several cable companies have entered the home networking business, finding it to be a relatively good source of incremental revenue. This often is done by charging a one-time installation fee of, say, $100 to $200 and then tacking a few dollars on top of the monthly high-speed data bill to maintain the in-home data network.

Opportunity knocks

This business model is ideal for those subscribers who lack the desire and/or the technical skills to install their own home data network, let alone fix it when something goes wrong. My high-speed data provider, Comcast, offers a home networking service that supports up to five computers connected to a cable gateway, a device that includes a router and cable modem. In most cases, the installation uses wireless connections. (For what it's worth, I installed my own access point, so I didn't bother to check what Comcast charges when they do a home network installation.)

If we assume that the majority of today's home networks are not much more than what was described in the previous paragraphs—maybe adding gadgets such as game consoles and personal digital assistants (PDAs) to the mix—it's fair to say that most home networks aren't too complicated.

But I think that's about to change.

Enter sophistication

A couple of the presentations at January's Society of Cable Telecommunications Engineers Conference on Emerging Technologies discussed home networks that are far more sophisticated than today's installations. Those presentations showed all kinds of interconnected devices, using wired and wireless media. The home networks of the not-too-distant future are way beyond simply providing a way for multiple PCs to share a single Internet connection. Indeed, some of the gadgets are starting to show up at retail.

While listening to ET presentations, the question that came to my mind was just who is going to be on the hook to fix those advanced home networks when they break? You got it—the cable company!

After ET, I touched base with Chris Dobrec, director of New Business Development for Linksys. He notes that key application trends in the home include four broad categories: the PC, entertainment, communications, and monitoring and management.

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With regard to the PC, internetworking multiple devices in the home—the TV set, telephone, PDA and, of course, the PC—will continue to be popular. Going forward, the mix is likely to include wireless security, wireless enhancements for improved range/distance, and different home network media (wired and wireless come to mind).

Entertainment is fairly broad and is just now becoming part of home networking, what with the media center or hub now available at retail from companies such as Hewlett-Packard. Look for home networks to embrace entertainment-on-demand; HD digital content; personalized content on any device at any time; and the home itself becoming a content source.

What about communications? You've probably heard about dual-mode phones that use an 802.11 wireless network in the home with a backhaul to the public switched telephone network (PSTN) via the cable system, and then switch to the regular cellular network when taken outside the home. This falls under the concept of integrated communications for fixed and mobile operation. Other application trends in this category include instant communications with federated user groups (for example, Skype users communicating among themselves) and presence integrated into voice communications—think a voice version of instant messaging.

Finally, in monitoring and management, the home network can incorporate remote surveillance, home system management, and even control of heating, ventilation and air conditioning!

Who will install and maintain all this?

Who, indeed?

It may be time for our own version of the Geek Squad! You've probably seen ads for the Geek Squad (www.geeksquad.com), with their trademark Volkswagen Beetles and employees known as "agents." Geek Squad's business model includes a 24-hour computer support task force; rapid response; on-site accessibility; flat rates; and hardware, software, and peripheral repair and maintenance.

This model has been so successful that the company was acquired by retail giant Best Buy. They provide phone support, in-store and in-home service. For instance, a Geek Squad agent will come to your home and set up your new PC for $129. Need more memory in your PC? They'll install it for $129 (plus parts). Installing a CD, DVD or hard drive will set you back $159 plus the cost of the drive. The flat rate fee applies whether the agent is in your home for 30 minutes or five hours.

Hey, we could do that!

I see no reason why we couldn't put together a cable version of the Geek Squad, or maybe establish revenue sharing partnerships with third party companies that specialize in this sort of thing. Assuming our financial folks sort out a business plan, a fee structure could be established, a marketing campaign launched, and a well-trained staff put in place. The latter will, in my mind, be the most critical. But there's no reason we can't do it. Heck, the Geek Squad got its start in 1994 and is more successful than ever. I recently saw an ad for a competing company apparently modeled after the Geek Squad. Clearly, this approach is viable.

So, is this something we're willing to do, or will someone else beat us to the punch? I think the window of opportunity is a small one. Let's not miss out.

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