
Can a bunny energize Wi-Fi at home?

By David Colker
Los Angeles Times - 19/8/2007

CONSUMER WATCH

A talking rabbit and a photo frame are fanciful ways to use the Web without a computer.

The white plastic bunny from France looks kind of Hello Kitty sweet as it sits all by itself on a kitchen counter or living room bookshelf.

It's a minimalist rabbit -- bell-shaped with simple black dots for eyes and a mouth, and pointed ears that stick up straight. Quiet, nice bunny.

Then it gets an e-mail.

Suddenly, the ears start twisting weirdly in different directions, lights flash in its belly and the bunny that seemed dormant a second ago begins speaking.

Think of it as a cross between a pet rock and Bride of Chucky.

What brings about this transformation? Wi-Fi.

The rabbit, whose commercial name is Nabaztag (Armenian for rabbit), is one of the latest attempts to give consumers another use for wireless Internet besides getting home computers online.

And why not? According to Forrester Research, 27% of U.S. homes are equipped for Wi-Fi, a technology that only a few years ago seemed exotic.

In addition to the bunny, another recent product is a digital screen, framed in wood for hanging on the wall, that can receive pictures via Wi-Fi from Internet photo services.

Both are sophisticated devices. Nabaztag, especially, can offer numerous audio services. The bunny can pass along stock prices, weather forecasts and news headlines, all periodically updated from Internet sources.

The bunny can pipe up as "Ryan deep voice," "Heather speaking quickly" and other choices. The device can play an Internet radio station or a short MP3 file sent by a friend.

The digital picture frame, from PhotoVu in Boulder, Colo., can show high-quality images nonstop from collections stored online.

But are these products ready for prime time?

They are far from the first attempts at finding alternative home uses for the Internet, untethered from computers.

In 2000, the online, stand-alone radio Kerbango made a big splash at trade shows. But it needed to be plugged into a modem.

After the Internet bubble burst, the venture collapsed.

With the subsequent rise of Wi-Fi came radios, cameras and portable Internet phones with wireless capability. But they never caught fire with the public.

The latest rage, Apple Inc.'s iPhone, has Wi-Fi for Web browsing and e-mail, although not, curiously, for making online calls.

Nabaztag is all about Wi-Fi. Although it didn't hit the U.S. until this year, it has been on sale in Europe since 2005, where it has gained at least a cult following.

On YouTube, there are scores of videos featuring Nabaztags dressed in a variety of outfits. Most elaborate of all are videos of a Wi-Fi bunny opera featuring 100 of the critters that was staged last year at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Is Nabaztag just a gimmick?

Josh Martin, an analyst at Yankee Group, thinks so.

"It's an interesting, quirky device," Martin said. "But it doesn't do anything all that startling. Most people already have their computers on, and it doesn't take much to stick your head in a room to see if there is e-mail, check stock prices."

And if it is a gimmick, it's a fairly expensive one at about \$190.

A spokesman for Violet, the company behind Nabaztag, says it takes time to fully appreciate all the features of the device.

"It takes many days to live with it, people have found," said Jean-Francois Kitten, speaking from France.

But Martin doesn't think the features of Nabaztag will warrant long trial periods.

"It's the kind of thing," Martin said, "that might be cool for a day."

David Hauser disagrees, although he acknowledges being a tech head.

He co-founded GotVMail Communications, a Weston, Mass., firm that operates an Internet-based call answering system for small businesses.

He and others at the company configured their Nabaztag to vocalize status and trouble messages that arose on their system.

"We could have done that without the bunny," Hauser said. "But we need something to laugh at when we are working at 3 in the morning."

This being Wi-Fi, setup isn't always smooth. Even Hauser had to call Paris a couple of times to get his Wi-Fi bunny hopping.

Executives at Violet say they have improved the setup for consumers.

But analyst Van Baker of Gartner Inc. said technical barriers were a fact of life for Wi-Fi, making the bunny and other gadgets less appealing.

"Issues around configuration and the changing Wi-Fi standards make them too complicated for most consumers," Baker said.

The PhotoVu picture frame has just one basic function -- to show off digital photos.

The Wi-Fi aspect of that is nifty, but not necessary. The photos can be delivered to the frame via a hidden USB memory key.

In fact, setting up the frame for Wi-Fi use on a test model at The Times was arduous enough to make USB delivery all the more appealing.

Also, the company's frames with Wi-Fi capability are pricey, starting at about \$1,000 for a 19-inch screen. PhotoVu said it eventually would put less expensive, Internet-capable models on the market.

Still, Martin believes that the future of Wi-Fi devices lies elsewhere.

"I think that down the road, you could have a portable music player that would put a piece of music you purchased on the home Wi-Fi network the minute you walk in the door," he said.

"That's the kind of thing that has more of a chance of succeeding."

He didn't predict a bright future for Nabaztag.

"I don't know if I should say that," Martin said. "Maybe the Wi-Fi bunnies will come after me."
