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A Voice in the Navigation Wilderness

By webdesign (<http://www.cablefax.com/author/webdesign>) | October 27, 2005 |

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What customer doesn't love the plethora of programming that comes with digital TV and VOD? But the Achilles' heel of all of that programming is being able to find a specific show or movie without wearing out the buttons on a remote while perusing on-screen guides. Earlier this year, Comcast Media Center announced its Video-Rich Navigation Program, which is designed to help viewers drill down through TV guides to the exact show or movie they want. VRN is integrated with GuideWorks' on-screen interactive program guide to allow cable operators to create custom video portals for customers. VRN integrates linear TV and VOD choices onto one portal where video mosaics are created by hyperlinking local content, linear TV and VOD movies to set-top boxes by using on-screen buttons and tags. The on-screen guide allows viewers to select from multiple programs simultaneously, and the content is then "one hop" away via the remote. CMC manages and operates the VRN platform, which gives cable operators the ability to program a video-based navigation system from one location instead of having to install individual systems at each headend. VRN is currently undergoing a field trial in a Comcast market, and is scheduled to be available nationwide in late 2006. Voice recognition another option Five years ago, AgileTV took a different path to helping viewers find programming when it started looking into a voice-enabled search and navigation service. AgileTV's search service, Promptu, has been in the field with various cable operators for three years, including Comcast's Willowbrook headend for a year and half, Insight Communications and Sunflower Broadband. Earlier this week, AgileTV and Sunflower Broadband signed a predeployment agreement for the rollout of Promptu. "It's one of the key problems," Sunflower general manager Patrick Knorr says of sifting through digital and VOD offerings. "We started seeing with our customers that there are so many choices that navigation is increasingly a problem. VOD multiplies that because there are so many more choices in finding what you want." Come hither, Tom Cruise AgileTV's service allows the viewer to push a button on a voice-enabled remote and say "find Tom Cruise," "CNN," or "scan movies." AgileTV says the latency between the spoken requests



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and the show or movie appearing is less than a second. Like Comcast's VRN approach, Promptu works with linear TV and VOD while software that will tie in DVRs is slated to be released next year. "The search functionality in AgileTV may be more important than the voice recognition, although the search capabilities aren't practical without the voice recognition," Knorr says. "I honestly think this is a platform for future technology as well. I think it's a powerful application that cable is well-positioned to deploy." Sunflower, which serves more than 30,000 subscribers in Lawrence and northeast Kansas, will target 250 to 300 customers for the trial that starts next month. Knorr says the plan is to offer the service to all of Sunflower's digital subscribers next year at an additional monthly cost of \$2, which includes the voice-enabled remote. Talk to me David Chaiken, AgileTV's chief technical officer, says the service was first rolled out on Motorola's DCT 2000 set-top boxes and also works with Sunflower's DCT 2500 boxes while the DVR version will be compatible with DCT 6412 and other similar boxes. Sunflower IT Manager Frank Wiles says several units of rack space were cleared at a headend to make room for the AgileTV servers, and the first system went live within 36 hours of the install. "It was a very east rollout," he says. "There have been a couple of bumps, any new technology is that way, but compared to anything else we've done over the past few years, its been the easiest thing we've rolled out." "We had some initial problems with our DAC (digital addressable controller) configuration and the carousel server that gets installed when you want to do a larger deployment, but we seem to have gotten those worked out." Sunflower's billing system changes the software on the set-top box when a customer calls in for the service. The voice-enabled remote and infrared receiver (IR) are mailed to the subscriber, the latter of which is plugged into the box by the customer. Chaiken says the speech recognition part of the equation begins with the remote, which actually starts some of the computations. When a customer holds down the talk key, the signal is sent back to the headend through the box at 1,800 bps using out-of-band communication coupled with enhanced return path technology. The servers at the headend do the heavy-duty number crunching of the speech recognition where the database looks up the words. Upgrades, including new searches and new algorithms, that increase the search and navigation capabilities will come from new server software. The service also collects reports on what words are being spoken and how the system in being used, as well as collecting bandwidth data. Habla Kansan? AgileTV even went to Kansas to record local accents to improve the accuracy of the service. "When I handed some of the technical people here the remotes, they assumed they would have to teach them how to learn their voices, but you don't have to do that," Wiles says. "You don't need a learning process, and that's the coolest feature." Dave Hanson, AgileTV's cofounder and senior vice president, says Promptu works with other guides and technologies, such as Comcast Media Center's VRN, and gives cable operators another tool in keeping customers away from satellite providers. "When you put the strategies and marketing techniques that some of the other cable operators are looking at with our voice technology, it really does make a better user experience," Hanson says. "That's what it's all about, and that's what we're trying to do."

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