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Hey, Remote: Find 'Seinfeld'

BY STEVE DONOHUE · JAN 23, 2005

Comcast Corp. is teaming up with Time Warner Cable to run a market trial of technology that could potentially change the way viewers channel surf: a voice-activated remote control.

After testing the product — which responds to voice commands such as “find *Seinfeld*” or “scan sports” — with employees, Comcast recently expanded a field trial of a voice-activated remote and program guide from AgileTV Corp. to 50 subscribers in Philadelphia.

The MSO may expand the rollout to hundreds of additional subscribers in its home city within 30 days.

“After we do these 50, we’ll do some more qualitative research, and in the next phase of the trial we’ll probably actually try to sell it. And at that point in time, we might try either including it in the package or pricing it,” Comcast senior vice president of digital TV Mark Hess said last week.

TIME WARNER TIE-IN

Comcast will work with Time Warner Cable, which is also considering deployment of the voice-activated remote controls, on conducting consumer research based on the rollout, Hess added.

With digital-video subscribers facing a choice of hundreds of channels, in addition to thousands of on-demand programming choices and content stored on digital video recorders, both cable and satellite operators are reshaping their interactive program guides.

DirecTV Inc. recently launched three mosaic channels that allow viewers to choose multiple channels from the same genre, which are placed on a single grid, and EchoStar has used similar mosaic channels.

In addition to helping differentiate itself from the satellite competition, Hess said one of the things that’s attractive about the voice-activated remotes is how easy they would be to market to subscribers.

“It’s a little bit easier to explain that VOD, for example, is to explain, or even a DVR is to explain,” Hess said.

AgileTV’s voice-activated navigation system, branded Promptu, relies on software that is placed on headend servers; a sidecar box that is connected to Motorola Corp.’s DCT-2000 set-top; and a remote control equipped with a microphone and a “push to talk” button.

Because the technology relies on a network infrastructure, AgileTV’s product would only work for cable operators.

But another firm, Newton, Mass.-based OneVideo Technology Corp., is developing a similar voice-activated navigation system that would run solely on a set-top equipped with a microphone, requiring no remote control and no headend software. OneVideo executives are pitching both cable and satellite providers, in addition to pursuing retail distribution.

AgileTV, whose investors include Motorola Inc. and Insight Communications Co., is the first company to bring voice-activated remotes and program guide to market. It ran a 15-month test on USA Media's Marina, Calif., cable system that ended last year.

AgileTV's Promptu remote contains the same features as a standard DCT-2000 set-top, but it has the "push to talk" button.

Two key voice command viewers can use with the Promptu remote are "scan" and "find." Viewers can say "find *Friends*," and quickly surf to whichever channel is running the sitcom, or say "find actor Tom Cruise" or any other actor, and the guide will present a list of shows or movies featuring the talent.

With the scan feature, a subscriber can say, "scan sports," or other genres such comedy and drama, and the channel will change every four seconds to every sports show available until the subscriber finds what he's looking for.

Subscribers can also access Comcast's on-demand library simply by saying, "on demand," and then choose a genre such as "sports" or "kids," and once they find a title they want to view, they would say, "watch" and the name of the program.

SUBS WILLING TO PAY

In focus groups, AgileTV found most subscribers said they would be willing to pay \$5 monthly for a voice-activated remote control — even before they saw the product in action, senior vice president David Hanson said.

"The people that actually used the product in the field at USA Media, when we asked them on exit interviews what it was worth, they said it was a \$10 [monthly] product," said Hanson, a cable veteran who worked previously for Diva Systems Inc. and Viacom Cable.

EchoStar Communications Corp. spokesman Marc Lumpkin said the company has taken a look at voice-activated remote controls. "It's something that we could consider," he added.

Gemstar-TV Guide International Inc. executive Todd Walker said Gemstar is bullish on voice-recognition, noting that the technology could also be used to drive other advanced digital TV features, such as chat, ITV and instant messaging.

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