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High-Speed Internet Without a PC
Microsoft Device That Turns TV Into Web Surfer Gets
By Walt Mossberg

Despite the spread of the home computer, there is still a significant minority of people for whom a PC is just too costly or complicated. These folks, including many senior citizens, would like to do occasional Web browsing and e-mailing, but without the hassle of owning or learning a PC.

Over the years, various products have been developed specifically for these technology minimalists. The most popular was WebTV, a small box that allowed people to browse the Web and do e-mail on a TV over a special Internet service you accessed using a dial-up connection. Microsoft bought WebTV in 1997 and eventually renamed it MSN TV. But it suffered from a clumsy, slow interface, limited memory, and its reliance on pokey dial-up connections.

Now, MSN TV is joining the broadband era. Earlier this month, Microsoft and Thomson's RCA brand released a fresh \$200 revamp of the product -- unoriginally named MSN TV 2 Internet & Media Player -- and my assistant Katie Boehret and I have been testing it for the past week.

This version finally allows users to go online via broadband connections, though dial-up is still an option. You can even connect using a wireless Internet connection, if you have one, though you'll have to spend around \$50 for a wireless adapter. You must pay a monthly fee of \$22 with the included MSN service, or \$10 a month if you choose your own Internet provider. Or, you can save a bit by paying annually -- \$200 a year with MSN service, \$100 a year without.

In addition, the new version lets you store, view and share photos, play videos, open some common e-mail attachments and do instant messaging. And it even has some features for advanced users who already have PCs, though these seem unlikely to appeal to its core audience.

MSN TV 2 is a large silver set-top box that comes with a remote control and wireless keyboard, both well designed and easy to use. Three indicator lights -- fluorescent green, orange and blue -- line up on the left front side of the unit, signaling power, Internet activity and the arrival of new e-mail messages.

Setup was a snap. The MSN TV 2 setup guide is one of the most understandable and well-organized manuals that we've ever seen. The guide is filled with large photos of the various ports and cords related to the MSN TV 2, and plainly stated directions walked us through hooking ours to an AC power outlet and then to a TV via the audio/video jacks. Pressing the "power" button on our remote keyboard displayed the first of several instructional setup screens that appeared on our television.

Registering for the MSN TV service requires your name, address, phone number and credit-card information. We used Katie's existing Hotmail e-mail address to set up the account, but you can also use existing MSN account e-mails or set up a new account. Pleasant piano music played in the background while we waited for the Internet connection to be established, and the entire process was simply explained, without any confusing instructions.

To navigate around the various sections of MSN TV, you can either use the remote control, which acts somewhat like a mouse, or keyboard -- both use infrared technology to correspond with the MSN TV 2 box, so it's important to set the box in a visible location.

Whenever you sign on to your account, you start at the home page, which has one advertisement in the top left corner and displays other data including your stocks and/or local weather on the rest of the screen. To aid with Internet browsing, a box labeled "Search or type www" is positioned in the center of your home page. At the very bottom of the page, you can choose from one of 17 colorful icons that represent different sections, including e-mail, photos, videos, chat, shopping, news, entertainment and sports.

Katie browsed through her e-mail, opening attached photos and Word documents with ease. She used the remote to mark e-mails that she wanted to delete or sort into folders, and then clicked a button on the right side of the screen to perform the desired action.

Browsing the Internet was a bit slow, and once in a while we had to retype text because our remote keyboard wasn't lined up to correspond with the infrared receiver on the box. A useful button on the keyboard labeled "Resize Page" will readjust the text on a Web site to better fit the screen. The keyboard also has three keys that, in two steps, can be easily programmed to link you directly to three of your favorite Web sites for easy navigating.

MSN TV 2 Internet & Media Player. Price: \$199.95 (plus service fees). More info: www.msntv.com

We watched a few videos, provided by the MSN TV service, including a sports video about a Red Sox game and a news video about the coming presidential election. The videos can be enlarged to take over your entire screen, but our videos froze more than once while we watched, which was a little frustrating.

If you buy a memory-card reader, you can plug it into MSN TV 2 using one of the device's two USB ports. We used a \$30 card reader by SanDisk, and it was ready for use right when we plugged it in. Katie took a SecureDigital (or SD) card out of a digital camera and slipped it into the memory-card reader, and when we opened the "Photos" section, the photographs from the card were displayed on our TV screen.

You can watch your photos in slide-show format, or you can select certain photos to e-mail to friends. E-mailed photographs are downsized automatically so that your photographs can be sent via a smaller file. MSN TV 2 still lacks a hard drive, and its storage capacity is limited to a meager 128 megabytes of RAM and 64 megabytes of flash memory -- more than the version released in 2001 but still not much. If you attach a printer to your MSN TV 2, you can print photos in their original high-resolution quality.

As we fiddled with the various features on MSN TV 2, occasional notices popped up at the bottom of our TV screen, accompanied by a chime. These notices appear whenever you receive new e-mail, which is helpful, but they also appear whenever a pop-up ad was blocked, which isn't something we care to know about every single time it happens. Microsoft says that you can't disable this message.

We also used MSN Messenger to chat online with one another through instant messaging, which was easy to do. But, as on a PC, the MSN instant-messaging system won't let you chat with people who use AOL's popular instant-messaging service.

What about those features for advanced users? Well, curiously, MSN TV 2 can be used as a home media-streaming device, a hot new type of gadget that lets PC owners play back on a TV all the photos, videos and music stored on a PC's hard disk in another part of the house.

Because this requires a PC, and some knowledge of networks and PC file systems, it's unlikely to appeal to the product's core audience of techno novices. And, even if a PC user bought and used MSN TV 2 expressly for this purpose, he or she would still have to pay the minimum \$10-a-month service fee, which other media-streaming gadgets don't charge. So we view this aspect of the product as relatively unimportant.

As an Internet device for the non-PC household, however, the MSN TV 2 is a good choice. It's well-designed and extremely user-friendly. If someone you know isn't ready for a computer, this is a good substitute.