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PRODUCT REVIEW: WebTV grows up, takes on media adapters

By MATTHEW FORDAHL
AP TECHNOLOGY WRITER

During the dot-com boom, people who didn't want to miss out on the Web and e-mail craze but didn't want to buy a real computer could get WebTV, which delivered the Internet through the warm, friendly glow of their TV sets.

Now that personal computers are cheaper and considerably easier to use, WebTV's original allure - even for newbies - has faded. But Microsoft Corp., which bought WebTV in 1997 for \$425 million and rebranded it MSN TV, hasn't given up.

The software giant recently released MSN TV 2, a \$199 device that now supports high-speed, always-on Internet connections, home networking and messaging on a TV - while still functioning as a basic TV-based Web and e-mail terminal.

Advanced users who for years collectively looked down their noses at WebTV will be surprised at how capable MSN TV 2 is and how well it works in home networks.

In geekspeak, it's a media adapter, a category of home networking gear that can stream such content as pictures, music and video from networked PCs to the television.

MSN TV 2 does much more than your average media adapter. It also puts content on your tube including news, the weather and the entire Web. And, like a PC, it can be expanded by plugging devices such as memory card readers and printers into its two USB ports.

The onscreen display is user-friendly and readable from a distance on an analog television set. Everything is controlled either through the included wireless keyboard or remote control.

As someone aware of WebTV's history, I must admit that my expectations were low.

My opinion began to change soon after I opened the box.

The hardware itself is almost Apple-esque. About the size of a large book, the main box is a silvery plastic perforated with hundreds of ventilation holes like a Power Mac G5.

Installation was a snap. For most of my tests, I had it hooked up to the living room television via composite cables and linked to my wireless home network, to which I easily connected.

After setup, it launched the subscription registration process. Fees start at \$9.95 a month if have your own Internet provider. It's \$21.95 if you want to sign up for dial-up ISP access. (There are discounts if you pay for an entire year.)

After signing up, the main page loads. It displays a handful of news stories, a weather graphic and icons to the various MSN TV services. The mail component is extremely easy to use from a distance - as was instant messaging.

Generally speaking, all content that's part of the MSN TV service looks great. It's much more hit-or-miss once you wander onto the Internet.

Some sites, such as Yahoo!, looked fine. Others forced me to bump down the size of the text - a simple task thanks to two buttons at the top of keyboard. There's also "Resize" key on the keyboard, and that expands horizontally, which required awkward scrolling.

Page navigation is through the keyboard or remote - and neither has a touchpad, trackball or other mouse-like device that would have made jumping around a page a lot easier.

I had occasional problems with the wireless keyboard, which was not as sensitive as I would have liked. Repositioning it so that the signal didn't have to pass through my legs helped, as did replacing the batteries.

Other features worked as advertised.

Video quality - both on external Web sites and within the MSN TV 2 service - was acceptable when the clips didn't show a lot of action. Radio stations, which are part of the service, sounded good on my TV's wimpy speakers.

The system also had no problem finding content on my home network. It effortlessly spotted all the shared folders on the various PCs where I keep pictures and music.

In the spirit of the old WebTV, I also tested it using a dial-up connection. As expected, it was slow but it still worked, though I no longer had the option of watching streamed video in the MSN TV service.

Clearly, this isn't grandpa's WebTV, but he'll feel at home with it.

On the Net:

MSN TV: <http://www.webtv.com>