

How feasible is it to give consumers real-time data on their consumption of utility services, and do they care? • Steve Hobson reports

Home economics

Web-enabled digital television could be a cost-effective means of delivering useful information on household energy and water consumption, but consumers are not yet convinced of the benefits.

These findings were among the conclusions of Smart, a long-term trial of service aggregation by organisations associated with The Application Home Initiative (TAHI), including Severn Trent Water, which reported to the Department of Trade and Industry in June 2005.

The Smart trial was designed to test the effect on consumption of providing consumers with real-time data on their energy and water usage. It used remote meter reading technology to send consumption data via a web server, broadband internet and a set-top box to custom-built screens displayed on a standard digital TV. This method was chosen to allow households with no experience of PCs to access web-based data and advice on increasing efficiency. To encourage regular viewing of the consumption data the service was augmented by additional services such as email, web browsing, recipe ideas, entertainment and home shopping.

Severn Trent Water installed the remote meter reading technology for electricity and water in the homes of six of its employees, but found it difficult to gain support from gas suppliers for the trial, so gas consumption data was not included.

A further 1,500 households in the Leicester area were offered the opportunity to join the trial, with incentives including a free broadband internet connection and digital set-

top box for a year, but only a disappointing 50 responded, and of these only 20 houses were deemed suitable to join the trial.

The trial proved that it is possible to deliver web-enabled services via digital TV to any household with access to broadband internet, and broadband will soon be available to almost every household in the UK. Importantly, current technology enables the communication to be done cost-effectively and with minimum disruption. However, individual homes require customised solutions, delivered by skilled installers, and the issue for organisations wishing to deliver aggregated services into the home is how to simplify the system while bundling the services that would make it attractive and profitable.

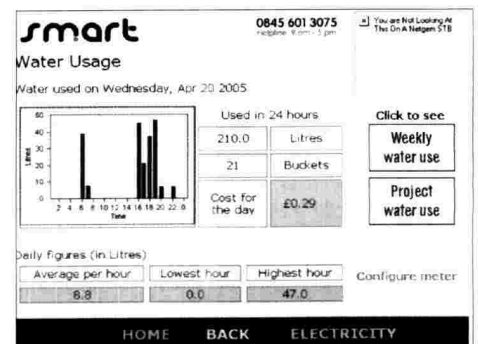
The poor response to the wider public trial also highlights a more worrying concern – apathy among the general public towards such services. Initial feedback indicated that even free trials are viewed with suspicion: the fear is that such technology is tantamount to having Big Brother watching individuals' behaviour. Set against a background of widespread lack of interest in energy and water saving, this distrust of technology may be a bigger barrier than the cost or technical feasibility of delivering the data.

However, the ability to present consumption data on easily accessed TV screens aligns well with the draft European Directive on Energy Efficiency, which will require energy suppliers to provide customers with the tools they need to monitor and modify energy use.

The boom in the take-up of low-cost broadband services has recently seen the number of broadband users outstrip dial-up for the first

time, and this has significantly improved the business case for delivering multiple services to the home since the trial was conceived in 2002. The trial proved that the software and hardware exists to create solutions that would benefit a wide range of consumers, and that these are sufficiently flexible to provide specific solutions for groups such as the elderly or the infirm. Service providers now need to be brought on board to develop the aggregated packages of useful data, services and home entertainment that will attract consumers.

Finally, the trial concluded that while services can be interconnected, this often requires additional development and support, increasing costs. A common architecture, such as the TAHI Open Architecture, could substantially reduce these costs, give confidence to consumers and provide a platform for organisations wanting to get involved in delivering the true "connected home".



Smart thinking: real-time data on utility consumption delivered over web-enabled TV

Source: Utility Week
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Friday 9, September 2005
Page: 25
Area: 469 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 4034 Weekly
BRAD info: page rate £2,200.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 020 8652 3500
Keyword: Application Home



Photo: Sharp

Sitting pretty: consumers have yet to be convinced about the benefits of monitoring their utility usage