

# JOINED UP BLINKING

Networked appliances are the future, and the future is now

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future, every appliance should have this technology, with specific products such as refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, ovens and heating controls going to the point where the end user can communicate with the appliance from the office, activating specific requests."

The burning question is, how far in the future is the future? According to Andrew Jones, product manager at Miele, it's not that far ahead. "In Germany and some other European countries, Miele will be launching its Miele@home smart home concept in early 2006, linking up to its increasing range of communication-enabled domestic appliances," says Andrew. "Initially the Miele@home system will comprise a small portable info panel and base unit. The mobile display unit provides a status report on all Miele domestic appliances connected to the system and prompts action where necessary. This can be something as simple as notification that a wash programme has ended, or a reminder to baste the Sunday roast! And, in the event of a fault, for example a freezer door

**N**etworked appliances, it must be said, have got off to a slow start. The concept of being able to phone the oven to start it cooking supper as your train pulls into the station may sound a great idea in theory but, given the difficulty some people have just setting their video, this was always going to be a dubious benefit to sell to a wide audience.

Often it's all a question of timing with new developments, and more than one computer in the home is no longer unusual. Likewise, a fast, always-on, broadband connection on the internet-enabled refrigerator now makes logging onto a cookery website to download a recipe a much more attractive proposition.

### The IT hub

"Whilst the kitchen is established as the hub of everyday life, it may soon become the IT hub too," predicts Mat Morrison-Clarke of Maytag. "We are seeing more kitchens open up architecturally to the other parts of the living area, which itself brings new opportunities. We are now past the start, as appliances are being designed and created to work at high levels of adaptation and communication, ultimately leading to a self-sufficient networked platform. Even if different manufacturers make them, they will be designed to communicate with one another, regardless of brand, through the emergence of common software systems."

In 1999, the Indesit Company introduced Leon@rdo, the first internet-appliance for the kitchen, enabling interaction across the entire digital world. Leon@rdo had a small touch screen, which contained a browser to navigate the internet, and it displayed a series of screens with useful information on household appliances, plus practical and personalised advice as to how to make better use of them. The enthusiasm Leon@rdo and the digital system received demonstrated that the market interest for the new home products was high, but unfortunately the cost was a real barrier for the mass market.

Leon@rdo was, if anything, an idea ahead of its time, but Indesit feels that one of the most important and futuristic characteristics of top-end production is digital compatibilities: white goods can be simply equipped with a modem to allow communication between themselves and/or with other devices, like a control panel, PC or PDA. Ellis Bardsley, commercial director for Fagor, thinks that in the future many appliances will have some form of web-based, wireless ability.

### Communication

"Perhaps a vacuum cleaner that can order its own replacement bags, call an engineer, or fault-find," suggests Ellis "In the

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left open by mistake, the system issues an immediate optical and acoustic alert. Thanks to its belt clip, the remote-controlled display can be worn on the body, when out in the garden for example, or stood upright on a surface."

### Real-world test

But what of today? In Boston (Massachusetts), Carla Graham was one of 20 families who participated in the Internet Home Alliance's Mealtimes Pilot, a real-world test of an internet-enabled kitchen. The participants in the pilot program, all in Boston, were already internet-savvy users with high-speed connections.

In her home, Carla had a Whirlpool Polara cooker that can run both hot and cold. She could put dinner in it to chill when she left the house, and it would keep the food cold until it was time to cook it. The Polara would then switch to heat mode and have dinner ready when she and her husband came home. And if she was running late, she could call the oven and tell it to slow down or hold. She also had a refrigerator with a WebTablet, on which she could keep her grocery list and place her shopping order with a US-wide grocery-delivery service.

During the pilot, Carla says what she liked most was having the internet in the kitchen and being able to access anything she wanted from there. She could pay the bills, manage

the bank account, do her shopping and entertain the kids. "So much of what I had done was scattered through the house (the family's main computer, for instance, is in the basement)." The internet-enabled kitchen made her life much simpler, but Carla said that she did not actually use the mobile phone provided by the companies to interact much with the appliances, because as a stay-at home mum, she could just walk over and punch a button on the cooker.

Jay Heuer, director for corporate innovation and technology for Whirlpool, said that the results of the study showed that people loved the functionality of the phone but found it too hard to use. He added that the results of the internet-enabled kitchen also showed that people are not afraid of technology. "People are afraid of looking stupid and incompetent. And badly designed technology can do that," he said.

Someone please mention this to VCR manufacturers! ■ kbd

### FURTHER INFORMATION

<b>Fagor:</b>	+44 (0)20 7354 0044	<a href="http://www.fagor.com/uk">www.fagor.com/uk</a>
<b>Indesit:</b>	+44 (0)870 777 6485	<a href="http://www.indesit.co.uk">www.indesit.co.uk</a>
<b>Miele:</b>	+44 (0)1235 233533	<a href="http://www.miele.co.uk">www.miele.co.uk</a>
<b>Whirlpool UK:</b>	+44 (0)208 649 5000	<a href="http://www.whirlpool.co.uk">www.whirlpool.co.uk</a>