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UStec of Victor is marketing a home network with one remote control

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As the number of technological gadgets in the U.S. home has grown, so has the desire to link them in one, easy-to-use network. But linking your computer, television, phone and other services required complicated bundles of wiring that were expensive to install and control systems that could be nearly impossible to understand.

Now, a Victor company thinks it's about to change that.

UStec has invented a system that links devices throughout the home with one simple cable that's becoming a building industry standard. That system, launched by the company last week, can be operated anywhere in the house through a series of set-top boxes and a simple remote control. It will control devices as different as your computer and your phone, your television and your iPod.

UStec, founded in 1992 by Bill Thompson, a former Xerox Corp. engineer, has long been a player in what's known as the structured wiring industry — bringing home networks to housing developments across the country.

However, UStec's new system, called tecStream, allows the company to move into the market for networks in existing homes, said Chairman and Chief Executive Lynn Hartrick, who came to the company in 2003. Thompson remains with the company as president.

tecStream runs over Cat5 wire, which has been installed in most homes built since the early 1990s. Because the system requires only one type of wiring, it can be installed more easily in older homes.

The system operates through an easy-to-navigate series of menus. Once a device is selected, the remote automatically controls it.

Want to watch a DVD in your bedroom, even though the DVD player is in the family room? All you need to do is turn on the television in the bedroom and follow the on-screen guide. Want to turn down the furnace even though the controls are in the hallway? Use the TV in your kitchen? Want to listen to an MP3 in your living room even though the computer is in the home office? Just press a few buttons on the remote.

The system doesn't discriminate against platforms either — it works with cable or satellite, Mac or PC, DVD and VCR.

"To be honest with you, we don't care" what kind of devices consumers use, said Thompson. "We want to be able to connect any and all devices together."

"It's really a platform on which any type of technology can be accommodated," Hartrick said. "Homeowners don't have to throw out the investment they've already made in their technology."

While tecStream lowers home networking costs, it still doesn't come cheap. Installed systems will likely cost between \$4,000 and \$10,000, the company estimates.

Eventually, tecStream will allow UStec to move into the multifamily housing and commercial markets as well, Hartrick said.

The idea of home networking is captivating a lot of companies across the country. Appairant Technologies Inc., a Henrietta company spun off from Eastman Kodak Co., was developing methods to transmit video, pictures and data around a house before it suffered a funding crisis earlier this year and its assets were auctioned.

Founder Jim Allen is now developing wireless home networking technology with a new company, ASTER Wireless. Consumers are pushing the industry to come up with simple whole-house networks, he said.

"The holy grail is how do you connect all this stuff together so a user can network it, collect it and distribute it," Allen said.

Allen said he expects there will eventually be room for several different platforms to do that job.

But Hartrick said UStec's technology overcomes the problems experienced by other systems based on Ethernet or Internet protocol connections. tecStream, he said, can handle more bandwidth than other products.

The system has UStec thinking about big growth. Hartrick says the 35-person company expects to add five to eight people by the end of the year. While the privately held company won't disclose exact figures, revenue grew close to 25 percent in 2004 and is on pace to top that this year, Hartrick said.

The company has also signed deals with Best Buy and Circuit City to provide structured wiring and related systems to installation arms of the two retailing giants.

The company has relied on a network of 500 dealers across the country to help it sell its other networking products and expects to use the network to promote tecStream.

One believer is Steve Janczak, owner of The Sound Guys, a custom installations business in Canandaigua. He expects to find a lot of demand for tecStream installations in existing homes.

"It will save me time and money in installations, and by extension that will save customers money. ... I think it will take off."

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