
Battle brewing over eliminating all those wires

Wireless USB is here, but Sony may buck the trend with its own format

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LAS VEGAS - The dream of eliminating the rat's nest of wires connecting your computer to your printer and other peripherals could be turning into a nightmare.

Even as the first wireless USB systems are reaching the market, drawing a lot of attention at the International Consumer Electronics Show this week, Sony Corp. has thrown a wrench into the works by unexpectedly announcing what looks very much like a competing, incompatible standard.

The confusion comes as some of the biggest technology companies — including Intel Corp., Microsoft Corp., Hewlett-Packard Co. and Samsung Electronics — have created a format to cure one of the biggest headaches involved in running a computer. (Msnbc.com is a joint venture of Microsoft and NBC Universal.)

Look under the desk, behind your computer:

Wires from your cable or other broadband modem to your desktop. Wires from the desktop to the monitor. And from the desktop to the mouse and the printer and the scanner and the speakers.

USB wires, most of them.

After a long struggle to come up with a single standard, the USB Implementers Forum, the consortium that created the nearly ubiquitous technology called Universal Serial Bus, is pushing Wireless USB, which is exactly what it sounds like — a USB connection without the USB cable, transmitting data over a wireless standard certified by the USB-IF.

'Here ... now ... and available'

The USB Implementers Forum is banking on consumers' familiarity with USB, the standard interface for virtually every PC in people's homes, to drive manufacturers to create WUSB hubs and, eventually, embedded chips so computers and peripherals will hook up without any intermediary hardware at all.

"Wireless USB is a technology that can be used wherever you use wired USB today," Jeff Ravenscraft, chairman and president of the USB-IF, said in an interview Thursday.

And major manufacturers are finally reaching the market with consumer systems. In its coming February edition, PCWorld magazine names IOGear Inc.'s wireless USB hub and adapter one of the 25 most innovative products of 2008.

IOGear says the hub can associate with three separate laptops or PCs, allowing wireless connections to previously wired USB devices like printers, mp3 players and scanners up to 30 feet away.

Lenovo Group Ltd. has a similar hub system ready, while D-Link Corp., Belkin International Inc. and Dell Inc. have theirs well along in production.

"This is here, and it's now, and it's available," Ravenscraft said.

Sony repeating a familiar strategy?

Which makes Sony's heavily promoted announcement of its proprietary TransferJet format this week so surprising.

Sony is famous — or notorious, depending on your point of view — for bucking mainstream technical standards and tying its customers to interfaces that they can buy only from Sony, such as the Memory Stick,

which it promoted in the face of the far more popular SD memory card.

"We always come out with a new technology and it's 'here's another one,'" Amy Koppman, a senior technical product manager for Sony, acknowledged Thursday.

The question is whether TransferJet is a direct challenge to WUSB, which essentially does the same thing — let you wirelessly transfer data from device to device securely at high speeds.

But while WUSB operates over many feet, TransferJet has a range of only 3 centimeters. You have to wave one device directly over the other to make it work.

Even so, Koppman said, you can indeed send files to your printer from your computer through TransferJet, in addition to trading photographs, documents and music files. That would seem to make it indistinguishable from WUSB, at least to the average home user.

Sony mum on WUSB

Which raises a familiar question: Are we now faced with another war of competing standards delaying the widespread adoption of a highly attractive new technology? Is this HD-DVD-vs.-Blu-ray all over again?

When asked how TransferJet differed from WUSB, and why consumers should have to deal with separate technologies to accomplish essentially the same thing, Koppman referred a reporter to Sony's engineers, who eventually summoned Itaru Maekawa, TransferJet's chief designer. He said no one at Sony would comment on wireless USB and the USB Implementers Forum.

Ravenscraft and other executives at the USB-IF also declined to comment on Sony's product, which was developed in secret and about which they said they knew nothing.

But speaking generally about competing standards, they said they were confident WUSB would come out on top.

"A company can go make one product that works with all their gear, but the consumer doesn't buy one person's gear," Ravenscraft said.

"They buy a camera from Canon, they buy a laptop from Sony, they buy a CD-ROM burner or a hard drive from Seagate — all those things have to work together," he said. "By having a proprietary solution, it's not going to fly."

In the end, Ravenscraft said, "people love USB. ... It's the most successful interface in the history of computing."

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