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The Network of Everything
by Pam Weintraub

Life was chaos. My home office, the supposed brain trust of my journalistic enterprise, was overrun by kids. Call anytime after three and you might hear the squall of two boys fighting or the sudden, subtle music of a ... cartoon! Try to leave a message and success was dicey: Wherever I put the answering machine, my kids knocked it over or disconnected the cord. As for the fax: Faggetaboutit! My perpetual connection to the Internet simply prevented faxes from coming through.

But now things have changed. My glitzy Manhattan phone number -- reflecting the clout of the big city versus the suburban outpost where I reside -- answers immediately and forwards the message to my email box, where it's played back to me as an audio wave file in seconds. The same number collects and sends faxes directly to my computer, easing that problem as well.

The solution, for me, came in the form of JFax, a company that provides small business owners with voice messaging over email. That's just one of the growing number of tools that integrate the Net with other forms of communication, from cellphones to wired phones to faxes. Technologies like this represent an early form of the holy grail for communication experts: a network that delivers all types of information over all mediums. Such

solutions, the model Ts of the true superhighway, are ready for a test drive right now -- and even in this early stage, they can greatly enhance the experience of communicating online and off.

"Think of it as simplifying your life," says Gary Hickox, president of JFax. "You'll no longer check voice mail, email, the fax machine -- it will all be one." A more profound testimonial comes from the Smithsonian Institution, which recently selected AirMedia's Live Internet Broadcast Network for its permanent research collection on information-technology innovation. A wireless communications company that delivers personalized versions of late-breaking news to user computers and a wide range of other devices over an existing paging network, Airmedia eliminates the tether of the modem and promises to bring the motherlode of information on the wired network to the wireless world.

When it comes to integration of media, perhaps the earliest popular applications were systems that locate buddies on the Internet and meld the sometimes disparate worlds of email and the World Wide Web. At Yahoo, for instance, a top-notch pager system enables you to "beep" friends and even send them instant messages or chat as you pick up custom news, stock quotes and more. ICQ does much the same.

Other systems fall into the category of what industry insiders call universal messaging: the ability to shunt email, voice mail and fascimile over the Internet. Under development by some 70 companies worldwide -- including Active Voice Corp., Applied Voice Technology, Centigram Communications, Lucent Technologies' Octel Messaging Division and Novell -- unified messaging promises to simplify life with a single receptacle for everything. "The beauty of our model," notes Hickox of JFax, "is that we're an overlay industry. We just ride on top of the email, fax, and voice technology already in place."

Still other firms are using the phone as the delivery medium. In October, Boston-based start-up Linx Communications announced it had attracted venture funding for a telephone service that will

merge a user's phone, fax, email and pager under a single number that rings home, office and car phones simultaneously.

These days, such combinations are taking hold most powerfully among home-office users, who really need the support. JFax's Hickox says his company targets the small business and home office, registering people through such high-traffic venues as Yahoo, America Online and Compuserve, as well as the company's Web site. For a cost of just $12.95 a month a JFax customer can send and receive voice and fax messages over the Internet from a remote phone number selected from one of any of 40 cities worldwide, with more options added every day. "We've been international from day one," says Hickox, whose group now has more than a million customers.
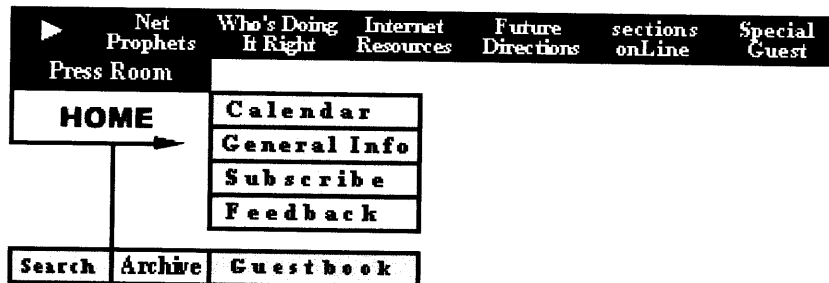
While JFax targets individual users and companies, Sun Microsystems and Lucent Technologies are collaborating to produce a large-scale system geared to address the needs of telephone and Internet companies that typically handle millions of calls and messages a day. The new platform, combining Sun's powerful Internet mail server and Lucent's text-to-speech technology, "will create huge market opportunities by extending the benefits of the Internet beyond traditional PC users," says John McFarlane, president of Sun's Solaris Software. "Imagine enabling parents without a computer to send an email message to their child's PC at college just by picking up the phone, or a state representative notifying via email a group of her constituents about an important environmental law being passed by just making a call from a cellphone on the House floor."

Finally, broadcasters like AirMedia strive to remove the last of our limitations by bringing the Internet everywhere, without the need for a wired connection at all. One interesting application is Air Media's new Healthcare Channel, which broadcasts real-time medical news directly to desktop PCs equipped with AirMedia Live software and an Internet antenna wireless receiver. "The channel presents a comprehensive source of information for medical professionals and a unique marketing opportunity for medical device and pharmaceutical

companies," says Bryan Parola, vice president of product management. At a cost of $5.95 a month per user, the system may be the best bargain in town. Doctors receive email alerts as well as news by interest area only after it has been filtered by AirMedia editorial staff. The company offers sports, business, technology, lifestyle and weather services as well.

To Parola, the AirMedia concept is still ahead of the curve. Versions to come, he notes, will be increasingly interactive, like the Internet itself. And delivery systems will be more widespread. "Now we deliver to desktops, notebooks, palmtops, cellphones and pagers," he says. "But with the advent of the new Iridium phones that receive messages from satellites, we'll be able to deliver above the cell towers, too." Imagine the boon to all those investment bankers currently out of touch with fast-breaking markets as they jet around the world.

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