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Remote Revolution

The Clicker Gets An Overhaul As Entertainment Choices Multiply

by Todd Spangler -- Multichannel News, 5/25/2009 12:00:00 AM MT

The humble remote control — lost in the couch cushions, cursed when it won't change the channel or even flung across the room — is ready for a major face-lift.

The devices have evolved since Zenith introduced the first TV remote in the 1950s, a bulky handheld job called the Space Commander, which used ultrasonic frequencies to change channels (magically!) without wires.

But while they've acquired more buttons, remote controls for the most part remain handcuffed to the same way of finding stuff to watch on TV since their birth 50 years ago.

"The remote has been frozen in time," said Andy Addis, senior vice president of marketing and business development at interactive-TV software firm Ensequence. "The user interfaces on the market today were designed for 100 channels."

With hundreds of linear channels, gigabytes of digital video recordings, thousands of video-on-demand options and potentially soon millions of Internet TV clips available to viewers, ye olde remote ain't gonna cut it.

"We need better devices to get through that large plethora of choices," said Comcast senior vice president of user experience and product design Gerard Kunkel.

Futuristic versions of the remote abound in the lab. Panasonic recently unveiled a prototype of a touchpad-based device with just six buttons, the EZ Touch, working with a live cable set-top box. The remote provides an on-screen keyboard to enter search terms and thumb-based movement of the cursor.

AT&T has in its labs a prototype of a remote with voice recognition that could respond to spoken commands like, "Switch to the Cubs game, but keep recording *The Closer*." The telco also has demonstrated an iPhone app that could control a U-Verse IPTV box (akin to Apple's own app for the Apple TV set-top), but hasn't announced plans to introduce that feature commercially yet.

Such gadgets will become critical as TV viewers increasingly interact with content and interactive applications instead of merely flipping channels, said Genevieve Bell, an Intel fellow who has studied the television-viewing habits of consumers around the world.

Remote controls as we know them today "will be considerably more useless when you have additional content streams coming in from different sources," Bell said. "We already see consumers struggling with the remote controls they have."

Updated versions will be in viewers' homes this year. Dish Network will launch the SlingLoaded VIP 922 HD DVR this summer — a remote control featuring a touchpad, with half the buttons of standard remotes. The design allows for thumb-control navigation and "underside index-finger trigger selection" to work with an on-screen pointer to simplify navigation.

Universal Electronics's Dolphin remote, set to be shipping to operators in late 2009, incorporates Hillcrest Labs's motion-detection Freespace technology to allow a user to wave a remote control in the air — like the Nintendo Wii — and move an on-screen cursor in any direction.

Comcast has a longer-term project, looking at next-generation remotes that will use a mechanism like a roller ball, scroll wheel or touchpad to make flipping through huge amounts of VOD or channels faster and easier. The cable company's Project Infinity aims to offer some 100,000 or more VOD titles someday — more or less impossible to scroll through using a typical up-down-left-right remote.

And Cox Communications is gearing up for the launch of its new interactive program guide in the third quarter of 2009, which will simplify navigation and, the operator said, lead to a more stripped-down, easier-to-use remote.

Remarkably, until now remotes haven't really needed to be updated: They're cheap for cable operators, and everyone knows how to use them. "The remote has been an afterthought," said Ramzi Ammari, vice president of product development at Universal Electronics, a large supplier of cable set-top remotes. "It's been sort of a necessary-evil cost for operators."

Cable companies have tended to treat remotes as something to "cost-reduce the crap out of" — in the words of one supplier — rather than as the key element of the customer "experience." For cable operators, the per-unit cost for standard operator-provided remotes is somewhere between \$4.50 and \$5, according to industry sources.

"You're still dealing with the fact that the remote is like a commodity," said Dominic Santa Maria, assistant product manager at Contec Holdings, a manufacturer of set-top remotes that also provides equipment-refurbishment services. "We have to balance the cost side of it with the value side of it, trying to strike that balance to keep the MSO happy but also keeping it in a price point that's affordable."

Moreover, cable subscribers — for now — aren't actually demanding new ways to interact with their TV. Comcast recently conducted an in-depth poll of 800 subscribers to measure their attitudes about existing remotes and future concepts for input devices. The unexpected finding: 74% of those surveyed gave their current Comcast remote an 8 or higher on a 10-point scale, with 10 being the most satisfied.

"I went into that research expecting to see consumers hungry for a new device from Comcast," Kunkel said. "It wasn't that they were without comments or criticisms ... But if you look at the research results by the numbers, there were an overwhelming percentage of consumers who said, 'This works well.'"

Comcast also asked consumers if they'd prefer a simpler, six-button device to their current cable remote; Comcast's standard DVR remote has 53 buttons. More people indicated they would stick with the current model. "I expected to see simplicity reign over the current remote, and it did not," said Kunkel. "There's a familiarity that's born out of constant usage."

The two main features Comcast customers have asked for, and which Kunkel's team is currently working on,

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