

Michael Hewitt asks what is the point of a **hybrid telephone cum internet terminal**.

Don't call us



I see the BBC has its finger firmly on the technological pulse, as usual. Flicking through this morning's Ceefax, I was advised of the invention of the miraculous iPhone, courtesy of the InfoGear Technology Group. The thing

is basically a hybrid telephone-cum-terminal. Using its inbuilt LCD screen and pullout keyboard, you can flit around the internet, send and receive email, and generally do all the sorts of things you'd normally do with a computer and modem combination.

Does it sound familiar at all? Well, if you've been to Dixons or its sibling, The Link, at any time over the past six months, you might have bumped into something called the Easicom 1000. This, too, is a hybrid telephone-cum-terminal that gives you internet access, email, and all that guff. It has an LCD screen, a pullout keyboard and a price tag of around £180 — as well as an astonishing resemblance to a device I first encountered, and indeed wrote about for PCW, about five years ago.

If your memory goes back that far, you might recall that the nascent InfoGear Technology Group invited me to dinner at a rather good Thai restaurant in Kensington. Except he wasn't calling himself a 'group' in those days. Anyhow, his pride and joy was this new-fangled device he'd invented called an iPhone, which allowed you to connect to the internet without using a PC. He would have demonstrated it to me in the restaurant itself, only it hadn't been approved by BT and, at the time, I think they had some sort of policy of breaking the kneecaps of anyone who tried to plug anything unauthorised into their network.

Anyway, it's only now being launched. Why the time lag, I wonder? OK, it was an expensive meal, and I was going some on the double scotches, so perhaps I did some serious damage to his marketing budget. But five years' worth? And why, after a five-year wait, are these hybrid phones, like the Number 47 bus, all turning up at once? Perhaps more to the point, what's the point?

I can see how the marketing men's minds worked on this one, I think. They reckoned that lots of people are nervous of PCs, and therefore, if you give them something that looks more like the good old familiar telephone, they'll be more comfortable with it. (In the

same way, I suppose, as the first automobiles were made to look more like good old familiar horse-drawn carriages, rather than having streamlined bonnets, tinted windows, and go-faster stripes.

And, five years ago, I'm sure that strategy would have paid off in bundles, because the average computer made the average person very nervous indeed. But now?

Today, most people accept PCs. They may not exactly like having one in their living room, but people didn't much like television sets, either, when they first came out, which is why most of the early models were in wooden cabinets with doors. That way, you could pretend to yourself it was just something you kept your drinks in. Similarly, for all but the most raging technophobe, a computer, like a television in the 1950s, is beginning to be regarded as something you really ought to have. If only to see what all the fuss is about. And, seeing as you can pick up a half-decent one for under £500, why not?

But an internet telephone is neither one thing nor the other. It is the duck-billed platypus of the technological world. As a telephone, it's fine. (Though, in an age when

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telephones are becoming increasingly compact, it is rather large — you wouldn't want to curl up on a couch with one.) But as an internet terminal?

The display, though adequate, is nowhere near as good as the display on a computer monitor. The keyboard is really only of use for two-finger typing. At the end of the day, all you can do is send and receive email and access internet sites.

OK, perhaps that's all you want to do. In which case, a PC will do it, anyway — albeit for just a couple of hundred quid extra — and will at least give you the option of doing a hell of a lot more. So, to come full circle: what is the point of an internet telephone? None. I predict they're a marketing misjudgement and will disappear from the shelves pretty sharpish.

Which, given my previous track-record, means you should probably all rush out and buy shares in InfoGear.

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