

Future of TV: Microsoft's Ballmer Sees Content Everywhere

CEO Hopes to Move Early Adopting Practice to Mainstream

By Brian Steinberg

LAS VEGAS (AdAge.com) — In the not-too-distant future, at least the one Microsoft subscribes to, TV consumption will be more portable than ever before as consumers see fewer and fewer differences between the screens belonging to their TV, the ones on their laptops and the ones on their mobile devices.

In a keynote speech delivered Wednesday evening here at the annual Consumer Electronics Show, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer sketched out a short-term vision of the future of TV that, if he has his way, will have Microsoft software at its center.

“My TV is powered by a PC,” he said, clad in a red V-neck sweater in front of hundreds of attendees.

He went on to talk about new electronic “slate” devices that will be available soon, including one from Hewlett-Packard in which Microsoft was involved. These devices will give consumers a bigger screen for TV watching and book reading than many smartphones have. He held up a new portable HD2 device by HTC coming out later this year for T-Mobile that people could use to carry TV content with them. And he demonstrated updated media software that would let consumers record and stream TV content directly to their computers via use of a “cable card” or from content-provider websites.

From early adopters to the mainstream

As some people who listened to his remarks pointed out, there’s nothing Mr. Ballmer unveiled that can’t already be done today by a savvy geek. But Microsoft would certainly have the power to take a practice that is largely relegated to first adopters and make it more mainstream. In doing so, the Redmond, Wash.-based tech company is likely to help accelerate the movement of traditional TV audiences to other methods of program consumption that rely less on models easy to support with advertising.

Media outlets and advertisers alike will have to get their heads around the new consumer habits likely to emerge. “People have taken their habits from the web and taken them to other aspects of their media-consumption life,” said Barry Frey, executive VP-advanced platforms, Cablevision, during a panel discussion Wednesday.

Microsoft’s pronouncements about the future of TV come as a host of tech concerns here are unveiling advanced TV sets that include not only technology to present content in 3-D, but also widgets and other links that bring the interactivity of the web to what was once the solitary living room screen.