Sony Reintroduces TV 'Place-Shifting' Products

Company's New LocationFree Devices Compete With Buzzworthy SlingBox in Emerging Market

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When it comes to watching television, TiVo revolutionized the "when," allowing viewers to easily record a program and watch it later. Now, Sony Corp. is trying to get out front in a battle for the "where" of TV viewing.

It's been two years since Sony announced LocationFree, a line of devices that allow users to stream TV programming from their homes to computers connected to the Internet. Yesterday, the company announced two new versions of LocationFree, which may draw some consumer interest in part because of the buzz about a similar product made by Sling Media, a San Mateo, Calif., start-up.

Analysts credit Sony for helping pioneer "place-shifting" products, which allow remote viewing of programs that are airing on the television set back home. But the product line attracted little interest when it launched, in part because the idea of watching mobile television was not widely known and also because the device was difficult to set up.

"You needed a significant amount of technical expertise to get it working," said Michael Gartenberg, an analyst with Jupiter Research. "Sling, on the other hand, focused on the user and made the setup process a fairly simple, out-of-the-box experience."

Sling Media's product, called SlingBox, may have a wider potential market, especially with those who use smart phones such as the Treo for mobile computing. Sling Media can transmit television shows to a smart phone. Sony supports only one mobile device: its PlayStation Portable video-game gadget. Software to...
device: its PlayStation Portable video-game gadget. Software to connect LocationFree to smart phones is in the works, though it is not being made by Sony, a company spokesman said.

The new LocationFree products will go on sale in the United States next month and will cost $200 to $250, with the pricier version equipped with more wireless options. Simplicity could be key for Sony, some of whose products fizzle because they're too tough to use or aren't marketed well.

It's familiar criticism for Sony, which heard similar complaints about a line of digital music players that hit the market long before Apple's iPod.

Stephen Baker, analyst at research firm NPD Group, said the LocationFree product line has not been pushed very aggressively by the company, which has a wide portfolio of products.

"I don't think Sony has given it the marketing effort that is required," Baker said. "To some extent some of these products from Sony get lost. It's just one product for Sony. For Sling, it's the only product they have right now."

Sony, famous for consumer electronics innovations such as the Walkman portable music player, has stumbled lately. A portable e-book reader, designed to let people download and read books, was supposed to appear in the spring.

Sony's biggest current undertaking, the PlayStation 3, was once scheduled for a spring release but is now scheduled to appear in the United States in November. The game console will cost as much as $600 and contain a Blu-ray disc player, an up-and-coming technology that is fighting the HD-DVD format to be the successor to the DVD movie standard.