

## ■ Lifestyle Planning Ideas

TRENDS: CUTTING THE CORD



Photography by William Psolka

**Wireless audio and video devices are striking multiple chords--throughout the home.**

By Mark Spoonauer

05/05 - Glen Albanese is a happy man: That's obvious when he describes how he can use his new wireless music system to cue up any song in his vast music collection from practically any room in his house. "It's unbelievable," says the Manalapan, NJ, resident, who lives with wife, Joanne, and their two daughters. "Every zone can have the same thing playing or a different thing playing. It's a spectacular device for being in the house and enjoying the music and the people you're with."

Glen owes his state of wireless nirvana to Sonos, whose new \$1,199 solution includes two ZonePlayers that operate over a network and an iPod-like color screen remote control. The key to his joy? Simplicity. "Everybody can use it," Glen explains. "In two minutes, they figure out how the system works, and they're having a good time with it."

Enjoyment is the name of the game when it comes to a whole host of next-generation wireless entertainment gear, now attracting attention from homeowners who don't know the first thing about wireless networking. "Most customers have no use for wireless routers until they recognize that such networks can deliver enhanced access to entertainment," says Anthony Ponzio, marketing manager for Philips Home Entertainment Networks Products division. "Everyone has photos or music they would like to enjoy more easily."

## **Music that Moves (with) You**

Working with local integrator Theatermax, based in nearby Freehold, NJ, Glen and his family were able to integrate Sonos ZonePlayers into the home office, kitchen, family room and home theater, as well as the gym and bar area/game room. The Albaneses plan to send music to the master bedroom and bath in the future, although they will wait until their two young daughters (ages 3 and 5) are a little older before outfitting their rooms as well.

Here's how the system works: The Sonos central ZonePlayer is connected to the home network's router or network storage drive. The Sonos software is installed on a PC, which searches for music files--including MP3, WMA (Windows Media Audio), AAC (Advanced Audio Coding) and uncompressed WAV files. From there, the main ZonePlayer distributes the music collection to other ZonePlayers located throughout the home using Sonosnet, the name of the network that operates within the 2.4-gigahertz range.

Because the ZonePlayer is only a receiver and amplifier, you need to supply your own set of speakers for each unit. The Albaneses are using various shelf speakers from NHT and are looking to add some in-wall units with the aid of Theatermax.

The controller sets Sonos apart, with its 3.5-inch color LCD screen, support for album art and a touch-sensitive scroll wheel. It's even splash and drop resistant. "We wanted to provide digital music lovers with the ability to control all of their music from the palms of their hands," said Mieko Kusano, Sonos's product development honcho. "This is something they have become comfortable with since the advent of portable music players."

Glen isn't the only one who appreciates the handheld controller's intuitive interface. He says his 5-year-old can find songs she likes by knowing the first letter of the track and sounding out the rest. "I think this says a lot for the ease of use of the remote control," he says.

He also loves how the remote automatically recognizes what room he's in, so he can control that zone within seconds. He says the only drawback is the lack of a docking station for the remote, which makes battery life a concern. "Most of the time, I keep it in my office plugged in, but I've used the remote for a couple of hours unplugged and have had no issues with it," he reports. Sonos plans to release a docking station shortly.

The musical joy felt throughout the Albanese house just scratches at the surface of a wireless wonderland. For example, the Philips WACS700 Wireless Music Center (\$999) takes a similar base station and satellite approach but should appeal to networking newbies because it skips the PC entirely. Instead, it rips CDs directly to its built-in 40-GB hard drive (enough for 750 CDs) and streams tunes to other audio stations in the home. What's more, these sleek satellite units sport their own Super Sound Panel so you don't have to connect external speakers.

In addition to being able to broadcast your music collection to each music station simultaneously, the Philips system boasts a Music Follows Me feature. Just press a button on the six-line LCD remote, and your favorite songs will come to life in whatever room you enter.

Although the product has only just recently become available, the WACS700 has already struck a chord with many. "Consumers would love a way to wirelessly have all of their CDs in every room, but not if it means setting up a PC network," Ponzio says.

## **Wire-Free Video**

The fun isn't just limited to music, as video-streaming capability is being built into everything from DVD players to LCD TVs.

Even though stand-alone wireless media adapters continue to be refined, devices that stream music, pictures and movies from your PC to your home theater have not exactly taken the living room by storm. That's why

companies are combining wireless connectivity with progressive-scan DVD players. It's one set-top box with many talents.

Take D-Link's latest Media Lounge, the DSM-320RD (\$269). Not only does it offer Wi-Fi (802.11g) technology for faster, smoother streaming, it's also compatible with several subscription content providers so you don't have to fret if your desktop isn't overflowing with media files. The higher-profile partners include Napster and Radio@AOL.

The Media Lounge's support for Windows Connect makes it easy to set up. Another unique perk is the 5-in-1 memory card reader, which is especially handy for those who want to be able to share pictures taken with their digital cameras without having to go through the PC first.

Buffalo's LinkTheater High Definition Wireless Media Player with progressive scan DVD (\$349) places even more of an emphasis on wireless video. Not only does it upconvert DVDs to HD (the player supports 720p and 1080i), but the LinkTheater can also stream high-definition movies over its 802.11g connection, including WMV (Windows Media Video) HD ([www.wmvhd.com](http://www.wmvhd.com)) and DivX HD files ([www.divx.com/hd](http://www.divx.com/hd)). No official movie download partnerships had been announced for standard-definition flicks as of press time, but Buffalo confirmed that the LinkStation works with such online services as Movielink and CinemaNow.

All of that is in addition to streaming MP3 and WMA audio files, as well as high-resolution photos. The LinkTheater doesn't come with memory card slots, but it does have a front-mounted USB port for plugging in a hard drive, flash memory drive or memory card reader. Just as important is the LinkTheater's sleek look. The company worked hard to design a component that would fit in with the most stylish audio/video gear.

### **TVs Untethered**

Until recently, you had to put up with a rat's nest of wires hanging off the back of your TV, spoiling the whole minimalist aesthetic. Things are looking up for wireless TVs, though, starting with the 15-inch Wireless Aquos (\$1,799) that Sharp introduced last year. The battery-operated Wireless Aquos can receive an audio/video signal from its transmitter from up to 50 feet away. And the monitor makes up for its small size with stunning 170-degree viewing angles and the ability to take the set outdoors, as the black TFT coating reduces glare.

Sony is taking a two-pronged approach to wireless TVs with its new LocationFree line, which features a 12-inch model (\$1,499) designed for home use and a 7-inch model (\$1,099) for frequent travelers. Like the Aquos, both of these wireless LCDs communicate with a base station, but the LocationFrees use the more robust 802.11a/g Wi-Fi standard for video transmission. They also double as touchscreen remote controls and let you surf the web and check email. The 7-inch LocationFree can tap into your live TV feed, DVD player or other video component while you're in a hot spot on the road.

### **Anti-Pod**

Regardless of the technology, wireless entertainment is designed to do one very old-fashioned thing, something we may not realize portable audio players and personal computers have begun to strip away from our daily lives. "Once upon a time, people would gather to share memories or listen to music." Philips' Ponzio says. "In the rush for personalization, that aspect of entertainment has been lost. Consumers are looking for ways to access what they want when they want, quickly and easily, and they are looking for ways to share these experiences in a more social setting."

Of course, we're not saying that a wireless audio system, DVD player or TV will bring families back together. But if Glen Albanese's experience is any indication, it's not a bad place to start.