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Future of home automation is here in affordable package

New setups don't require pro installation

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Imagine being able to play your favorite DVD, dim your living room lights, control the temperature on your thermostat and turn on your backyard irrigation system just by sitting on your couch and clicking a touch screen.

The scenario may sound like something out of *The Jetsons*, but it is a reality because of emerging "home-automation" technology.

The term home automation has existed for dozens of years but systems have been used mostly by people who could afford to spend thousands of dollars to rewire their homes.

Now, some companies are selling out-of-the-box systems for as low as \$600 that are easier to install. Valley resident Joan Parkinson hopes to join them.

Parkinson got the idea to create a device three years ago when she moved from Scottsdale to a home in northeast Phoenix. She grew frustrated having to hook up her television, DVD player, stereo system and other home electronic devices all over again.

Parkinson's sentiments were the impetus for HomeRun, a home-automation system that enables homeowners to control everything from their stereos to their lighting systems by clicking a computer touch screen.

"I'm thinking to myself: I keep moving boxes and boxes of equipment, and they are all pretty much similar in what they're doing," she said. "All I wanted to do is put them into one box so I just take one system with me and move it and put everything I need in my system."

Parkinson, a former counselor turned entrepreneur, is working with local engineers and technology experts to put the finishing touches on the system, which she said she hopes to begin selling to home builders by March and to homeowners by year's end.

She said she plans to sell the system for \$5,000.

"We're taking what's out there that's the best, putting it into one system so you don't have boxes and boxes . . . of equipment and wires running every which way," Parkinson said.

Parkinson said her system will differ from other home automation packages that are

available because it can be installed without the help of a service person. But she still faces steep competition.

Control4, a Salt Lake City firm, is considered one of the industry leaders.

Formed in 2003, the company offers a home-automation system called the Home Theater Controller that sells for about \$600 and lets users run their home-theater system with one remote. Other systems cost \$1,500 or more.

Control4 also sells products ranging from wireless light dimmers to wireless thermostats that may be controlled remotely.

Locally, the company sells systems through independent home-audio stores.

It also sells through some Circuit City stores, Magnolia Audio Video stores and Tweeter stores.

Eric Smith, chief technology officer and co-founder of Control4, said such technology has become more mainstream because it is easier to install and more affordable for middle-class households.

"We are really trying to go after the broader market," Smith said.

Despite the competition, Mark Biegel said he is confident that HomeRun will find its niche.

The home-automation market is expected to grow in the next few years.

"The existing players are not currently capable . . . of supplying that entire market, and there is plenty of room for additional products and services," said Biegel, chief technology officer of Home Integration Systems and president and CEO of Mesa-based Plexera.

Plexera is developing the software that will support HomeRun's user screen and the touch screen that will be used, Biegel said.

Parkinson noted that home builders are interested in including HomeRun in their developments.

Jimmy Evans said he wants to install the technology in a Tempe loft development he plans to begin building near Arizona State University in the next few months.

The development, Spence Avenue Lofts, will feature 16 three-story units with a fourth level that serves as a party deck, said Evans, of J. Evans Construction in Phoenix.

"We are a society of convenience," he said.

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