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New York Newsday - August 15, 1994

The Information Highway's Cold Shoulder

An important debate is going on in the U.S. Congress, not about health care, but about the "information highway," a high-tech system that will bring instant information and every conceivable type of entertainment into our homes.

The cable industry, the regional Baby Bells and long-distance carriers are fighting for the right to deliver this system into our homes - through a futuristic combination of the telephone, television and computer. However, the wizards designing the information highway are overlooking the actual way members of typical American households communicate - through messages, reminders and announcements stuck to the kitchen refrigerator door. The modern icebox is not just an appliance that keeps food fresh; it is the true hub of the information society.

Unlike the cable-converter box or the video telephone, the refrigerator has a proven record as the most reliable and efficient way to store and retrieve information. Where else but on the refrigerator door do parents leave emergency telephone numbers - and where else are children reminded of their upcoming encounters with the dentist's drill?

The refrigerator door is also easily customized to meet the needs and reflect the values of each family - a few brightly colored magnets secure all relevant news clippings, weight-loss techniques and birthday party invitations. As Doug Marlette has observed, the true test of a newspaper cartoon's appeal is whether it gets posted on the refrigerator door.

Already in more than 99 percent of American homes, the refrigerator has far greater household penetration than the personal computer or even the television. And it's the most user-friendly: Every family member knows where the refrigerator is located and how to operate it.

With more than enough space and electrical power to accommodate the latest flat-screen technology, the refrigerator has been ignored by the regional telephone companies eager to manufacture communications hardware. While television sets and telephones are largely imported from abroad, most refrigerators are still made in the United States. In fact, there are 14 different companies that produce refrigerators in this nation.

Regional telephone companies could bypass federal rules that prevent them from manufacturing telecommunications equipment by simply acquiring refrigerator companies. Then they could replace the refrigerator door with a touch screen and link it to a telephone jack. The "information-age icebox" would probably reduce the nation's trade deficit, since American firms - always eager to sell overseas - would quickly discover that the refrigerator is our best hope to

compete in the global information market.

The information-age refrigerator might even be the way to salvage Internet, the sophisticated network that apparently has far fewer users than had been claimed. It should come as no surprise that Internet - which ignores the refrigerator's vital role in delivering information within the home is not a household word. Far more people "hit the refrigerator" during a 24-hour period than hit their keyboards. And there is no evidence that the refrigerator causes repetitive stress injuries.

Just as the interstate highway was built with roadside restaurants, it would be a shame if Congress left the fridge out of the information highway.

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