



Financial Times

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Published: May 10 2007 17:06 | Last updated: May 10 2007 17:06

Some software applications and services defy classification. Raketu, a free peer-to-peer service that packs more features and tools than a Swiss army knife, is one such application.

Launched last September, Raketu is a still-evolving bundle of communications, information and entertainment services.

Trying it out is easy. You point a web browser at Raketu's website (www.raketu.com), download a small file and fire it up. The software, which for the moment runs only on Windows-based PCs (a Mac version is in the works), takes about 16Mb of space on a hard drive. While a broadband connection is best, Raketu works well over a dial-up connection.

Raketu's extensive features are accessed from its striking blackLaunchPad interface, which provides lots of visual prompts, including a calendar, weather details, stock price data and RSS automated news feeds. The interface also provides one-click access to podcasts and standard and specialist search tools such as Google and Ask.com.

Among Raketu's communications features accessed from the LaunchPad are VoIP (voice-over internet protocol) PC-to-PC calling, dial-out calling to standard landline and mobile phones, instant messaging, SMS text messaging and file transfers/sharing. Users can also access Raketu's newest and arguably most exciting features: internet protocol TV (IPTV) and video on demand (VOD).

At its core, Raketu, like dozens of other VoIP rivals, aims to outperform Skype, the market-leading PC-based internet telephony service. As with Skype, registered Raketu users can call each other from 42 countries at no cost. As well as these "in-network" calls, Raketu users can sign up for a prepaid service called RakOut (similar to SkypeOut) that lets them make low-cost domestic and international calls to non-Raketu users on ordinary phones (fixed or mobile) in the same 42 countries.

Voice quality is similar to that of most of the other PC-based VoIP services I have tried, but Raketu claims a significant advantage in that it does not use "supernodes", which link computers to transfer data. Raketu says this provides a more secure and faster service without affecting performance.

One of my favourite communications features in Raketu is the ability to send low-cost international SMS messages easily. Raketu also provides comprehensive instant messaging features. While it includes its own IM client, most users – like me – will want to stick with the IM client they are most familiar with, or that family, friends and associates use. So Raketu's Multi-Messenger feature allows users to add their AIM, MSN, Yahoo, Google Talk, Skype, ICQ or Jabber accounts.

One of Raketu's distinguishing features is being able to conduct an IM chat session with friends while you all watch the same IPTV streaming video channel or VOD content. Raketu calls this integrating social networking with communications and entertainment. I am not convinced there is a real demand for it, although several other services have recently been announced that enable users to chat while watching the same video content.

The other problem, so far, is that Raketu's IPTV and video-on-demand content is limited, although the streaming video does include one blockbuster – BBC Parliament – that I found very useful as a sleep aid.

In addition to limited free VOD programming, Raketu offers some premium VOD content including sports and music – some in English, but much of it in foreign languages. In time, it promises a much broader array of video content including music videos, live concerts, mainstream films, cartoons and international sport.

This month Raketu launches a mobile version to run on smart phones running either Symbian or Windows operating systems. Mobile users will be able to download a small application to provide access to services including free or low-cost national and international VoIP calls over an internet connection – either cellular or wi-fi.

Like other mobile VoIP offerings, Raketu promises to eliminate the high-priced roaming and international call charges levied by traditional mobile operators and cut the cost of SMS text messaging.

Overall, Raketu is an impressive, evolving package. There are rough edges, and some features, such as the video offerings, are sparse. The concept may be a little confusing to non-technical users, but I have yet to come across another single package with such a wide range of communications, information and entertainment tools. And the price is hard to beat.