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Millennial Net, WebGen enter into an energetic joint venture

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By Matt Kelly

Two local startups trying to crack open the market for energy management in commercial buildings teamed up this week to deliver a next-generation product based on wireless sensors.

Millennial Net Corp. and WebGen Systems Inc. struck a deal in which Millennial Net will sell its wireless sensors to WebGen, which will incorporate the technology into a larger package of energy-management hardware and software. WebGen will then hawk the technology to businesses that own buildings of 50,000 square feet or less, where hard-wiring an energy-management system can be prohibitively expensive.

Mark Noyes, WebGen's chief executive officer, said that in late 2003 the company knew it should incorporate a wireless solution into its portfolio of energy-conservation software. After some market research, WebGen decided on a mesh network rather than point-to-point networks.

"The only company available was Millennial Net," Noyes said. That the two companies are only a few towns apart — WebGen in Cambridge, Millennial in Burlington — was coincidental.

Millennial Net, meanwhile, gains a reseller with experience in handling clients concerned with energy management. Many IT executives still consider wireless sensors an exotic technology, so leaving WebGen to address the end-user's qualms suits Millennial Net just fine. Customers "trust WebGen that it's done its due diligence," Millennial Net chief executive Andrew May said.

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The sensors in question are Millennial Net's Mesh485 package, to replace the RS-485 wiring standard in buildings for energy, ventilation and temperature controls. The sensors, for example, could relay thermostat information to a central heating system. They will be integrated into WebGen's IUE (Intelligent Use of Energy) software package.

WebGen will first pursue customers that own small buildings such as branch offices, Noyes said. Corporations often see the value in energy-management systems but balk at the cost of retrofitting small buildings, especially if the structure is made of difficult material such as concrete or might contain hazardous materials such as asbestos.

"The elimination of wiring changes the economics and feasibility of implementing an energy-management system in a small building," Noyes said. WebGen will tackle larger buildings in 2006 and beyond once it demonstrates success with small buildings, Noyes said.

So far WebGen has one customer using Millennial Net's sensors, which Noyes would not name but identified as among the largest banks in the country. A pilot installation at an unnamed utility company is also under way, he said.

May said the two businesses spent most of 2004 integrating their hardware and software into a solid product offering. "That was no small task. ... many times when you move to wireless, there are software adjustments to make it work," he said.

He also said he expects to follow this model for other applications of Millennial Net's product; almost every customer so far has essentially required Millennial Net to be the system integrator, so providing pre-packaged solutions will sit well with potential customers.

A chief rival of Millennial Net is Boston-based Ember Networks, which makes chips and software that other manufacturers can use to make mesh-network systems. Venkat Bahl, Ember's vice president of marketing, agreed that "a lot of people are still trying to get their arms around mesh networking," so reselling agreements and collaborations are a good strategy to elevate the technology's profile.

Ember does not have any reseller agreements outright, Bahl said, but has numerous partners such as IBM or Lanthorn Technologies "to plug the holes in the value chain" that Ember alone does not fill.

Bahl said Ember also counts energy management as a primary application for its products and estimated that about 12 Ember customers use its chips and software to develop energy-management systems.

Matt Kelly is a freelance writer based in Somerville.

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