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Viewcall: VW beetle of the superhighway

By Alan Cane

Imagine on your television screen a cross between the classified advertisements in your local newspaper and cinema trailers for neighbourhood businesses.

This gives the flavour of Viewcall, a company new to Britain's information superhighway, which intends to mount a 1,000-household marketing trial in the autumn.

It has developed technology which makes it possible to transmit high quality still pictures, text and sound over conventional copper telephone lines to standard television

Tomorrow, it will demonstrate the latest version of its system at London's Cafe Royal and invite content providers to sign up for the trial. It has already attracted Great Universal Stores, while other large retailers and mail order houses are interested.

Viewcall differs from most multimedia services in a number of respects. First, it will be cheap: about £2 a week for residential customers. Second, it will offer only advertising (or, more correctly, some shopping). Third, it will be local in style and content.

The brainchild of John

Bentley, perhaps best known for property dealing in the early 1970s but who has since been chiefly involved in entertainment and media, Viewcall raised £770,000 earlier this year through an offer for subscription.

Viewcall system works out at about £250 a home, is capable of transmitting images of almost photographic clarity and quality, making possible views of a holiday resort to accompany flight availability information and prices.

This is made possible by a mathematical method for squeezing down the number of binary digits needed to transmit the image, called fractal compression.

Viewcall believes its technology is reliable and secure. The system is being tested by employees at present prior to the big trial this autumn. Viewcall may look more like a Volkswagen beetle than a Porsche on the superhighway. But it may deliver what people want, and at the right price.