

Taking a narrower focus

AOL sheds its brand to draw specialty audiences

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NEW YORK — Unless you're looking carefully, you'll likely miss the fact that the new Asylum Web site for young men is a creation of Time Warner Inc.'s AOL. Same for WalletPop on personal finance, Spinner on indie music and StyleList on fashion.

The AOL brand is taking a back seat as the company long associated with dial-up Internet access for the masses quietly launches dozens of sites targeted at specialized audiences.

AOL figures that to grow its audiences — and draw additional advertising the company crucially needs to offset plunging revenue from its shrinking base of Internet access subscribers — it must break from a one-size-fits-all model and let its specialty sites set their own designs and editorial tone, shedding the AOL brand when necessary.

Bill Wilson, AOL's executive vice president for vertical programming, said the company has been retaining the AOL name for some sites — AOL Body is one, after research showed women 25 and up respond well to the brand.

And the brand isn't completely invisible even if AOL isn't part of the site's name. There's usually a small AOL logo somewhere, along with links to other AOL sites. The right mix, Wilson said, is the product of research on what makes the most sense for consumers.

Take Asylum, which has grown into a leading site for young men since its December launch. The name was chosen partly to convey humor and irreverence.

"If we put it out as AOL Men, we got the feedback it wouldn't connect," said Mike Rich, a senior

vice president who oversees Asylum and other specialty sites. "People just didn't connect this type of content with the AOL brand."

Wilson said AOL's unbranding can help potential visitors know that the site isn't part of its subscription service, which AOL started breaking down in late 2004 in favor of free, ad-supported sites.

AOL parent Time Warner was more blunt in a regulatory filing:

"If AOL cannot effectively build a portfolio of alternate brands that are appealing to Internet consumers, AOL may have difficulty in increasing the engagement of Internet consumers on its Web products and services. AOL believes that the 'AOL' brand is associated in the minds of consumers with its dial-up Internet access service."

AOL is by no means alone in promoting alternative brands.

Google Inc. has its homegrown Orkut social-networking service alongside its Picasa photo products and YouTube video-sharing site, both brands that came in through acquisitions. On the other hand, the Keyhole brand disappeared when Google bought the mapping concern, which became Google Earth.

Yahoo Inc., meanwhile, has Flickr photos and recently launched Shine for women.

Microsoft Corp. has a slew of brand names, including MSN, Hotmail and Live.

But unbranding represents a reversal for AOL after it tried to make its Moviefone and Netscape acquisitions more AOL-like. Type in "Moviefone.com," for instance, and you're automatically redirected to "movies.aol.com."

"AOL currently implies legacy. It implies old. It implies out of



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Above, the AOL Running Man logo and other decorations are shown in AOL's New York office Monday, while, at right, an AOL Web site is shown on a monitor on a wall of the company's New York office. A company rooted in bringing the Internet to the masses, AOL is shifting its focus toward serving niche audiences with the launch of dozens of specialty Web sites.

date," said Rob Enderle, an industry analyst with the Enderle Group. "If you want to attract a new, young audience to a site, attaching 'AOL' is probably a kiss of death. They are wise to use the new individual property brands."



The choice between 'point and shoot' and digital single lens reflex

As the prices for digital cameras fall and the specifications for them climb, you may be wondering which avenue to pursue for your next camera, compact point and shoot or DSLR? If those terms sound foreign to you let me explain.

A compact, point and shoot camera is an entire class of cameras that may be called compacts or point and shoots (P&S). As the name implies, they are small and easy to operate. They generally have a fixed, non-removable lens and there often are not many accessories for the camera.

A Digital Single Lens Reflex or DSLR refers to a camera that has interchangeable lenses and the photographer actually looks out through the lens of the camera while composing pictures. The shutter usually responds instantaneously and when buying a DSLR, the photographer has many options for accessories and lenses.

So in making a decision of which avenue to go, there are many options to be weighed.

Price — The price differences between the two types of cameras automatically place them in different categories. P&S digital cameras start around \$100 and often top out around \$500. DSLRs can start around \$600 without a lens and can climb into the thousands.

Size and weight — There is no question the use of a DSLR is not as convenient as a Point and shoot. Some P&Ss may weigh less than just the lens attached to a DSLR. And for size, a DSLR does not fit conveniently into a pocket and often requires a bag full of equipment to match some of the possibilities that a P&S offers.

Lenses — The zoom range of some P&Ss is so large, it would require multiple lenses for a DSLR to match. And if you have ever worked with a DSLR, you know that changing lenses is time consuming and a way of introducing dust into the camera. Usually even



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This image shows the difference in size between a DSLR and a compact point and shoot. What isn't conveyed is the weight difference. The subject was nearly pulled to the ground when I attempted to hang the camera around her neck.

the cost of one DSLR lens can cost more than a P&S camera.

From the picture I have painted, it would sound like with all the benefits a P&S has, why would you want to buy a DSLR? Well, here's a few points to keep in mind.

Many more options in equipment choices plus better, brighter lenses — Usually you consider the camera body of a DSLR to be a starting point in a system that offers a lot of flexibility. You can add to that system as your skills grow adding accessories like specialty lenses, filters and flashes that provide more options than a P&S. Also DSLR lenses often use better materials and can work in much lower lighting conditions than a P&S.

Bigger, brighter and more accurate viewfinders — One of the limitations of a P&S is the viewfinder system. You may only have the LCD screen to use to compose you



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image. These can be very hard to see in bright light. Many cameras also have an optical viewfinder, which approximates what you will record. But with a DSLR, what you see in the viewfinder is what you will get in the picture, which makes framing an image very natural.

Instant shutter response — One of the most common complaints of P&S cameras is the time delay between pressing the shutter and capturing the image. There are ways to compensate for the delay, but with the DSLR, the result when pressing the shutter

button is instantaneous.

Better flash — The flash built into a P&S camera is relatively weak reaching only 10-15 feet. DSLRs allow the attachment of an external flash extending the range 4 to 5 times and also allows coupling with studio lighting which can illuminate entire rooms and be completely controllable. When using an external flash, red eye problems are eliminated as well as strong shadows behind the subject.

Camera Raw — Almost all DSLRs offer the ability to shoot in Camera Raw. This is

Going once, going twice Get Windows XP while you can

The Microsoft operating system called Vista was introduced over a year ago and has not easily replaced its predecessor, Windows XP. It fact, it could be said the operating system (OS) has not been met with much praise at all. Computer magazines frequently point out the shortcomings of the new OS and how to revert Vista-based computers back to Windows XP.

One reason for the non-acceptance is Vista requires a more robust computer just to accomplish the same tasks at the same speed as Windows XP. That coupled with Vista not always working well with older equipment and software, has also kept users from upgrading. Personally, I know of one user who had to completely reinstall the OS due to a conflict created with trying to use an older piece of software.

Even my own brief experience with Vista was not favorable. Every time I went to look for something, it was renamed and in a different location. I felt like someone had come into my kitchen and completely rearranged my cupboards. I have found that there seems to be a mentality in the media that the OS is flawed and it's successor is only 1 to 2 years away. So, there seems to be little, if any, gain in upgrading especially with Windows XP being supported by Microsoft until 2014.

The interesting part of all this is Windows XP is being forced off the market by Microsoft. Windows XP will no longer be available on new or refurbished computers after the end of June. Microsoft has dictated that all new machines and even refurbished machines will be sold with Vista. When you are the largest seller of software, you have that kind of clout.

So if you want a new computer with XP you need to get moving. Keep in mind that if you go to a large local retailer, you may not have the option of even finding a computer with Windows XP. Almost overnight, systems with XP vanished, when Vista was rolled out. So if you want XP, you will have to have the machine custom built, which can be done either through mail order or any local vendor who does custom computer builds.

So when the June 30 deadline rolls by, does that mean that you will no longer be able to by XP? No, you just won't be able to buy it pre-installed on a system. You can buy or build a computer without any OS installed and then install XP yourself.

a file format that stores exactly what the sensor sees and does not do any processing to the image. The best part about it is that it retains all the data the camera sees. When recording in the JPEG file format, usually the choice for a P&S, exposure information has to be clipped in order for it to fit into the JPEG file format. Think of it as trying to fit 12 ounces of a drink into an 8-oz. glass.

Larger sensors — even

though the megapixel capture in a DSLR may be the same as the P&S camera, the actual sensor size is larger, which creates better pictures as they are more receptive to light.

So you can see that making the decision might not be simple. For me, it is. You need both. A compact point and shoot when you want to take snapshots and a DSLR when you want to get serious with your photography.