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**Huh?**

**Can't work your new toys?  
Meet Sydney's geeks for hire**

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# An alternative to reading manuals

Buying tech toys is one thing, but wiring them up is the challenge, writes **Darren Baguley**.

There are few things more satisfying than bringing home a shiny new computer, wireless router, big-screen TV, surround sound system or personal video recorder (PVR), and getting it all set up and working first time, straight out of the box, as advertised. Truth be told, however, this tends to be a rare occurrence. Even experienced technology journalists that review scores of gadgets every year occasionally get frustrated to the point that a mouse or remote control gets bounced off a wall. It's not so much the technology itself – each new model of any given appliance is usually easier to use than the last – the problem is that users are getting more advanced. When it comes to entertainment systems, consumers have gone from TV and VCR set-ups to home theatre systems with DVD players, cable TV and/or digital set-top boxes, surround sound and PVRs. Instead of just connecting a printer and maybe a scanner to their PC, consumers are now running

broadband-connected wired or wireless networks throughout the house. These networks connect up everyone's computers, printers, scanners, external hard drives for storage and if one of the PCs happens to be a Media Centre PC, there's often a connection into the home entertainment system as well.

One result of this trend towards complexity is that more and more consumers are paying someone who knows what they're doing to come in and sort everything out instead of spending hours reading the manuals – if you're the type to read manuals – and then even more time trying to connect everything up. It's not a new idea – specialty hi-fi shops have been offering installation services for years – but demand has been growing steadily as home theatre systems and home computers have become more and more popular as they've come down in price but increased in complexity.

Hi-fi industry stalwart Len Wallis of Len Wallis Audio ([www.lenwallisaudio.com](http://www.lenwallisaudio.com)), has noted a definite trend towards consumers paying for installation services. "There are still some compatibility issues between different brands so for that reason we only install systems we've sold ourselves. But we get a lot of calls from

people who have bought a system and can't work out how to put it together."

People in that situation often end up calling a company called Audio Visual Advisor ([www.audiovisualadvisor.com.au](http://www.audiovisualadvisor.com.au)). Director Tony Scholefield says his staff can specify a system for consumers who are bewildered by the sheer number of components on offer, taking into account parameters like existing equipment, the system's main purposes and the environment it will be installed in. It also installs systems that people have already bought.

And like Wallis, Scholefield has noticed that over the past few years there's been a marked increase in the number of people choosing to get their home entertainment systems professionally installed. "We often get people calling up after they've tried putting it together themselves and found it doesn't sound like it did in the shop or sometimes it just doesn't work at all."

The Audio Visual Advisor charges about \$90 per hour, plus the cost of any cabling that might be required if existing interconnects or cables aren't up to standard. It includes physically connecting all the equipment up, configuring it and showing the user how to operate it. "A

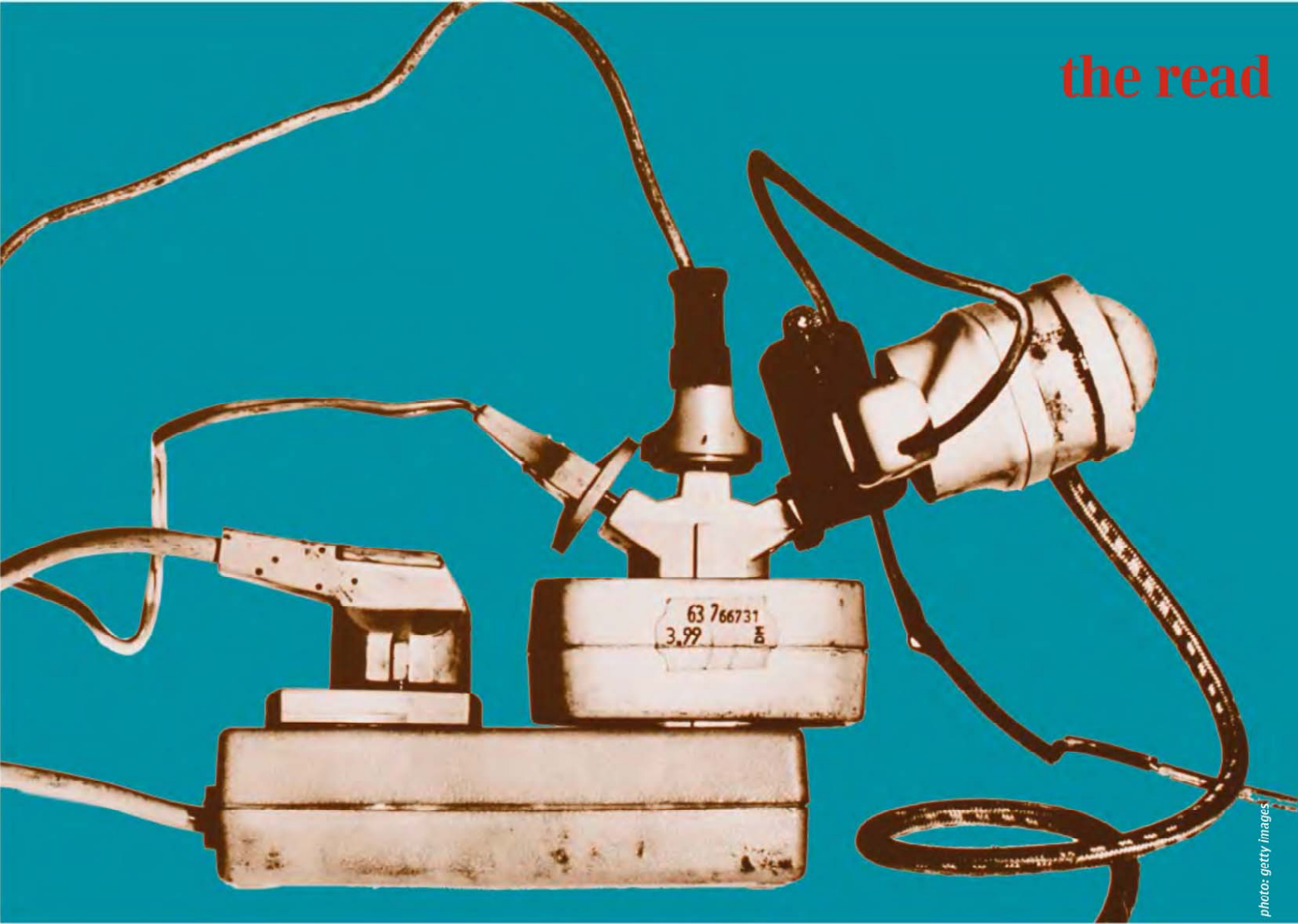


photo: getty images

properly installed mid-range home entertainment system will often outperform a more expensive system that has been poorly put together," says Scholefield. "Or another way of putting it is if a consumer has spent \$10,000 on a system but gets only half the capability because it hasn't been put together properly, they've basically wasted \$5000."

And it is this philosophy that has caused the creation of Australian technology services companies such as Gizmo, Geeks2U and Tech Troopers. These businesses have been patterned after the spectacularly successful Geeksquad, an American-based company that offers 24/7 computer support. Gizmo ([www.gizmo.com.au](http://www.gizmo.com.au)) provides over-the-phone support nationwide and in-home support in the Sydney metropolitan area. Before launching Gizmo, CEO Brett Chenoweth commissioned research outfit the GfK Group to scope out the market.

The GfK Digital Lifestyle Australia study 2006 found that 77 per cent of Australian households now have eight or more digital devices in their homes and people are increasingly networking these devices together. The same report found that nearly 50 per cent of people had problems

installing technology such as wireless routers, and that most technology users rarely use more than 25 per cent of a digital device's capability.

"We've identified four major demographics which are likely to use support services," said Chenoweth. "Baby boomers and older people who start off just wanting to keep in contact with their grandchildren via email, but don't know the first thing about computers. Then there are people who are cash rich but time poor, people with families who are also time poor, and really small one- or two-person SOHOs [small offices/home offices]."

Computer support services are not a new idea, but in the past these companies focused on servicing small business. What is changing is that companies offering these services are experiencing greatly increased demand from consumers. Like Chenoweth, Geeks2U ([www.geeks2u.com.au](http://www.geeks2u.com.au)) technical director Peter Kenneally is witnessing home networks proliferating and becoming increasingly complex.

"Consumers and people running small home-based businesses often don't want to be the household IT manager, so more and more are paying for computer support service providers to do it all for them," says Kenneally. "We did one job

recently where the CFO of a large financial institution wanted his, his wife's and the teenage kids' computers networked to a central laser printer instead of the four individual inkjets they were using."

Using Gizmo's over-the-phone service is a flat \$60 and support that requires less than 10 minutes costs just \$20. Unlike many support service providers, Gizmo home-service visits are charged at a flat rate. "We carry the risk," says Chenoweth. "If one of our technicians can't get something to work within a reasonable amount of time, it's our problem, not the customer's."

Tagged 'Gizmo packs,' the fixed price services range from \$120 to \$240 depending on the job and include services such as setting up and securing a wireless network, upgrading to a new operating system and installation of a new system. By contrast, Geeks2U charges \$99 for the first half hour and \$25 for every 15 minutes after that.

Both Gizmo and Geeks2U offer one-on-one tutorial services, teaching users how to do anything from basic tasks such as sending an email or setting up a spreadsheet to more sophisticated functions such as managing a wireless network.