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Wi-fi pioneers offer cheap router

A Spanish firm is to sell subsidised routers as part of a plan to turn domestic wi-fi networks into public hotspots.

Fon will sell wi-fi routers, which allow people to surf the net wirelessly, for \$5 (£2.75).

The company, which has financial backing from Google and Skype, aims to create public wi-fi networks street by street across the US and Europe.

"Wi-fi is universal in cities, but access isn't," said Juergen Urbanski.

Mr Urbanski said Fon was aiming to have 50,000 working hotspots worldwide by September, 150,000 by year-end and one million hotspots by the end of 2007.

To date, 54,000 people worldwide have signed up to become "foneros," up from 3,000 in February, according to the company.

'Social movement'

The company is hoping to create a "social movement" as well as a business.

The router offer is designed to overcome obstacles to helping consumers quickly set up hotspots using Fon software.

In exchange for receiving a router, users must agree to share their wireless connections with other Fon users for 12 months, the company said.

Users register their router with Fon via a PC which then lets other people access their wi-fi network safely - if they can pick up the signals from outside their homes.



Fon aims to create a global community of wi-fi users

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“ We are just piggy-backing on the back of existing wi-fi connections ”

Juergen Urbanski

'Changing economics'

"We are changing the economics of wi-fi," Mr Urbanski said during a conference in San Francisco. "We are just piggy-backing on the back of existing wi-fi connections."

But Fon faces challenges - from technical limitations to legal obstacles.

Current wi-fi networks have a limited operating range and Fon will need an army of "foneros" if the public hotspots they are advocating take off.

They will also face a challenge from firms planning to offer free, ubiquitous wi-fi in cities such as San Francisco.

Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and broadband carriers are also unwilling to allow a user's private broadband connection to be used publicly.

Mr Urbanski said Fon was seeking to win over carriers who lease the underlying internet connections by arguing its strategy could expand the market for wi-fi by giving customers a way to roam away from home, making them more loyal subscribers at home.

"The reality is that we are all talking with... many of the large ISPs in the United States."

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