

Australia Financial Review  
May 8, 2007  
Page 35  
Section: Information  
Region: National  
Type: National Newspaper  
Circulation: 85,665  
Size: 208 sq. cms.  
Published: Monday - Saturday

# Nerds, geeks in growing demand at home

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A booming consumer technology market has created a rush of companies moving to provide in-home IT consultancy and repair services. The home services market is worth an estimated \$500 million, and will grow to an estimated \$1.1 billion over the next five years, according to Gizmo chief executive Brett Chenoweth.

Services veteran AWA recently launched a franchised consumer technology support service, and engaged a franchise consultant from Deacons Consulting to help get the

business off the ground. The company had said it aimed to operate a national network of franchisees by the end of 2007.

Sydney-based Gizmo — which doesn't franchise its operation — had already made a "multi-million dollar investment", bringing the business to market, Mr Chenoweth said. It included what he described as a six-figure acquisition of the three-man Melbourne company, Nerds For Hire.

Mr Chenoweth said he planned similar investment levels as he took the business national in coming years and had already secured deals

with AAPT, Primus and Toshiba, all of which hand off their customers when their support needs exceeded their own capabilities.

Several other organisations are adopting the same template offered by AWA and Gizmo, which challenges suburban IT retailers by offering call centres as the initial point of engagement, uniformed field service personnel and no-fix, no-pay guarantees. Jim's Group already has nearly 70 franchisees in its Jim's Computers arm, while Canadian organisation Nerds On Site plans a national expansion.

Tweed Heads-based Computer

Solutions is focusing on regional areas, and has 10 operations in Australia plus two in New Zealand. It said it had attracted interest from franchisees in the USA and UK.

SuperGeek, Geeks2u and others are also crowding into the space.

The reason for the boom is the growing complexity and interdependence of consumer technology, which makes it difficult for vendors to support it by themselves.

"Increased functionality in consumer technology devices mean more support calls," Toshiba Information Systems Division's general manager, Mark Whittard, said.

"But we are not experts in every single software package."

Microsoft Australia group manager Cynthia Kouvatas said that even Microsoft cannot support consumers alone. "It would be very hard for us to provide the central support," she said.

Mr Chenoweth was confident that spelt opportunity for his company.

"Most of the companies are a cottage industry," he said.

"We see it growing into a \$1.1 billion market over the next five years and are building an organisation that can scale to meet that opportunity."