Skype Fiddles With Classrooms And WiFi PR Stunts While The Product Languishes

Skype [1] is coming out with a bunch of announcements and perhaps (perhaps) it's sign of a re-invigorated operation even though there remains continuing grumbles from users about the actual product development and the lack-lustre, dated, interface and features.

First up it's expanding its wireless offering in the UK and Ireland by partnering with wireless broadband provider Wicoms. "Free Skype WiFi" will be offered in high street retailers, hotels and businesses that carry a dedicated Wicoms router. Skype has normally offered free WiFi at travel hubs and on holidays, but this is broader. Users just need to go into those outlets and log on with their Skype ID using the Skype WiFi application, or sign up for one on the spot. Businesses can sign up to it by getting a free router in October only.

Meanwhile, Skype has announced [2] a number of new partnerships for its 'Skype in the Classroom [3]' initiative, bringing in NASA's Digital Learning Center, The National Museum of the Royal Navy and HMS Victory, British Council, VerbalizeIt, Action Aid, Woodland Trust, Education through Expedition and Choose2Matter joining the scheme which is all about promoting video-calling in the classroom – and spreading the adoption of the application of course. Skype says over 38,000 teachers are now collaborating on 1,800 educational projects globally.

These moves follow similar deals with Penguin Group, New York Philharmonic, Science Museum London, Peace One Day, and Save the Children back in May. The initiative is clearly designed to sync with World Teacher's Day on Friday this week.

Meanwhile Skype's actual product is admittedly getting tweaked here and there under its Microsoft overlords. There's been a new Skype for Mac [4], a hinted at 'Skype for browsers' project [5], an integration [6] with Office. And its usage has jumped [7] 50% in the first quarter this year.

So with numbers like that you can understand why Skype's product managers don't really feel like they need to innovate on the product much. Skype is not about to be displaced by Apple FaceTime or Google Hangouts any time soon.

But The problem is that Startups like Voxio [8] and even the interesting Voxer [9] are proving that there is plenty more to be done with voice, so it's to be hoped they will do a little more than keep announcing partnerships which don't have much to do with the product.

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