

Springwise newsletter | 16 January 2008

Grabbed from the spotting aisles this week: a lifehack for airline passengers, rice babies from Japan, kits that let consumers mix their own cleaning products, auto insurance sold by the mile, a hotel that will be 100% retail space, and more. Our next edition is due on 23 January 2008. In the meantime, check out our daily postings on www.springwise.com, send us your [tips](#), and please don't forget to [tell your friends and colleagues](#) about us. Much appreciated!



While being able to check in for flights online has made life easier for airline passengers, it isn't always as convenient as it could be. Airlines generally allow online check-ins 24–30 hours before take-off. If a passenger wants their pick of seats, they'll have to remember to log on as soon check in opens—which could be at 3 a.m.—and need to be online to do so. (Unfortunately, many check-in systems don't play nice with mobile web browsers.)

An inconvenience to consumers usually means a business opportunity for smart entrepreneurs, and this is no exception. [Check Me In](#) was launched in June 2007 to help passengers check in as soon as they can, without having to be online or ask a colleague or family member to do it for them. How it works? After booking a flight, passengers log on to www.checkmein.eu and enter their flight and personal details, indicating their seat preference. For EUR 7 per one-way flight--which covers up to 5 passengers on one booking--Check Me In takes care of the rest.

As soon as check-in opens for a flight, the company snags the best available seats, in line with their customers' preferences. Customers receive an email confirmation that includes their boarding pass. If they don't have access to a computer or printer, customers can print their boarding pass at the airport terminal. The Dutch company's founder, Iwan van Geelen, told us that many customers handle check-in themselves for their outbound flight, but use Check Me In for their return trip. The service is currently available for over 20 airlines and 350 airports worldwide. With air travel becoming increasingly taxing, air travellers need all the help they can get. More lifehacks for fliers to follow? And how about combining Check Me In with [Triplt](#)?

Website: www.checkmein.eu

Contact: www.checkmein.eu/contact_en.htm

Spotted by: frankwatching.com



Recyclable Travelodge can be built in 12 weeks

[Qbic](#), an innovative Dutch hotel we covered when they launched last year, features units that contain a bed and bathroom as well as a TV, DVD-player. As we pointed out, these 'cubes' are manufactured offsite and can be used to quickly and easily create guest rooms in buildings that might not otherwise be deemed suitable for (semi-permanent) use as a hotel, like vacant office buildings.

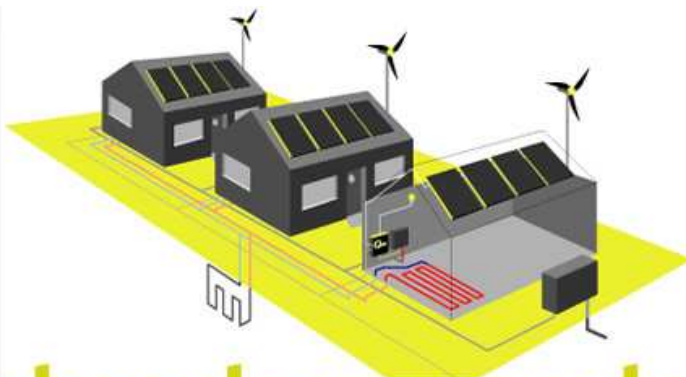
Budget hotel group [Travelodge UK](#) recently announced a variation on this theme: a hotel made of steel modules that resemble shipping containers, which are stacked on top of each other like Lego blocks. Each module contains a bedroom and bathroom, with plumbing and wiring ready to hook up to the rest of the units. Once the container-like elements have been bolted together, the structure's exterior walls are covered with brickwork or other cladding to make them look like any other Travelodge. The construction model was conceived by [Verbus](#), and is currently being used to raise hotels in Uxbridge (opening in June) and Heathrow Airport (opening end of 2008). Although the hotels have yet to open, Verbus and Travelodge have already considered their demise. When the modular lodges have run their course, they can be dismantled and the steel casings can be reused at other sites.

Travelodge was purchased by investment firm Dubai International Capital in 2006, and has been rapidly expanding ever since. Modular building will help speed up further expansion, and will also make it feasible to build temporary hotels for major events like the Olympics. Travelodge estimates that a hotel could be built in as little as 12 weeks using the modular construction method. Not quite a [pop-up hotel](#), but definitely an interesting alternative to traditional hotel construction, which should definitely inspire anyone involved in hospitality or building. (Related: [Stackable homes](#).)

Website: www.travelodge.co.uk

Contact: www.travelodge.co.uk/contact_us

Spotted by: Bjarke Svendsen



Neighbourhood approach to renewable energy

Finding sustainable and affordable ways to power the world is clearly a substantial and increasingly urgent challenge. We [covered](#) consumer-generated power back in 2006, but Dutch startup [Qurrent](#) is taking the notion a step further with technology to enable neighbourhood-wide energy networks.

Because of fluctuating patterns of consumption, homes with wind and solar energy generators can find themselves with surplus energy at some times of the day but not enough at others. Surplus energy typically gets sold back to the main grid, but as much as 30 percent of it gets lost along the way, according to [EcoGeek](#). When a group of homes work together to manage their collective energy generation and use, on the other hand, higher levels of demand in one home can be matched with surpluses in others, thus evening out the group's overall consumption and minimizing the amount that must be drawn from the main grid. Participating homes essentially form a "mini-grid" that shares energy internally before exchanging any with the main grid, thereby minimizing waste and maximizing efficiency.

To make it all happen, Qurrent provides a device for each participating house known as a Qbox. Each linked to a central Qserver, the Qboxes in the network monitor energy flows in each home and optimize them for maximum network-wide efficiency. They share capacities as needed among neighbours, and can also autonomously turn on devices such as washing machines and dryers so that they are run at the optimal time. A consumer could tell their Qbox that they want their laundry done by 6 p.m. and that it will take roughly 1.5 hours, for example. They can then go to work and the Qbox will decide when is the best time to run it, taking into account their production profiles and energy rates as well as those of their neighbours.

Qurrent won the 2007 Picnic Green Challenge for the best marketable green idea that could be developed and sold to consumers within two years. Along with the award came a EUR 500,000 prize, which reportedly will be used to pilot-test the concept in a Netherlands neighbourhood. One to get in on early?

Website: www.qurrent.com

Contact: info@qurrent.com

Spotted by: RK



Navigation system gives drivers a visible lifeline

In-car direction finders have revolutionized driving. But for many drivers, the devices' spoken instructions eventually become annoying or distracting. And while it can be a big help when your device tells you to turn left in 500 feet, trying to estimate that distance in heavy traffic can add to stress levels.

The makers of [Virtual Cable](#) say they have a better solution. The New York City area start-up has designed a heads-up dashboard display that virtually 'paints' a highly visible line above the road ahead. The line curves precisely where a driver using an in-car navigation device would normally be instructed to turn. Follow the line till you reach your destination. It's that simple.

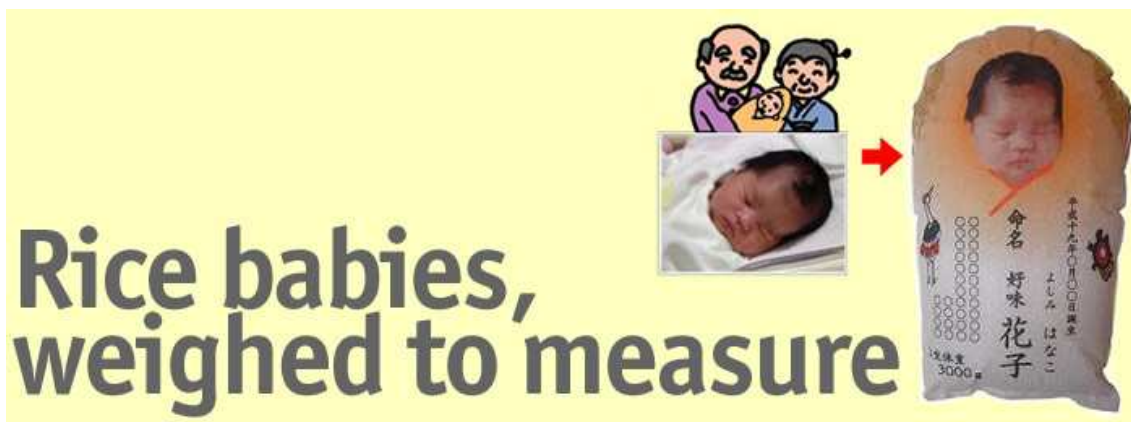
Little wonder that Virtual Cable's founders drew thousands of curious visitors to their website after their product was first introduced at a navigation technology [conference](#) in San Jose, California, last December. But before the product reaches consumers, the parent firm, Making Virtual Solid, must partner with an existing navigation system maker. Virtual Cable will only be available in new cars, the founders say, though it also will be retrofitted into some commercial vehicles.

Nonetheless, Virtual Cable illustrates how the relatively new auto navigation field continues to innovate rapidly. Other exhibitors at the December 2007 conference discussed ways to grow advertising revenue and maximize subscription return. Both should prove vital areas as the market matures. Meanwhile, in the wake of the January's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, tech writers have discussed industry efforts to incorporate entertainment, social networking and hacker protection into auto navigation systems, while readying those systems for WiMax as that wide-area broadband technology continues to expand. The takeaway: all these niches within the auto-navigation field remain blissfully open to any entrepreneur with a sellable idea and the wherewithal to get it to market.

Web site: www.mvs.net

Contact: www.mvs.net/contact_us.html

Spotted by: Bjarke Svendsen



Taking personalization in a new direction, Japanese [Yosimiya](http://www.yosimiya.com) is selling bags of rice printed with a newborn's photo, name and date of birth. The bags are shaped to resemble a swaddled baby. But the key feature is that the bags contain the baby's exact weight in rice. Holding the bag will therefore feel like holding the baby. Bags of rice with baby's photos printed on them aren't new in Japan, by Yosimiya is the first to make them to order, creating bags that match the baby's size and weight. The personalized, made-to-order 'dakigokochi' are priced from JPY 3500 (USD 32 / EUR 22) and available in a wide range of colours and designs.

Yosimaya's dakigokochi are selling like hotcakes and mainly given to friends and family by the baby's parents. Could this be one of those Japanese crazes that catches on in other parts of the world? Ongoing interest in personalization (see the [books](#) and [DVDs](#) for children that we recently covered) definitely won't hurt, and both parents and other gift-givers are always on the lookout for fun new baby gifts. It's also the kind of business that can easily be started by solopreneurs with a crafty bent. Build a cute website to sell the product online (or use [Etsy](https://www.etsy.com)) and start printing, sewing and selling. We hear they make good doorstops, too ;-)

Website: www.yosimiya.com
Contact: shop@yosimiya.com

Spotted by: Mio Yamada



Starter kits for home-made cleaning products

In December, we [featured](#) a few companies that sell eco starter kits: (gift) boxes containing products like aluminium water bottles, energy-efficient light bulbs and low-flow shower heads, all aimed at helping jump-start a more environment-friendly lifestyle.

One of our [Springspotters](#) alerted us to [Eco-Me](#), which took the concept a step further by developing kits that help consumers create their own cleaning products. Whether for health or environmental reasons, more people are switching to 'natural' cleaning products from brands like [Ecover](#) and [Seventh Generation](#). Eco-Me's founder—Robin Levine—was concerned about the (small) amounts of synthetic chemicals that are still present in most eco-cleaners, and decided to go back to basics, mixing her own products using simple recipes and ingredients that have been used for hundreds of years.

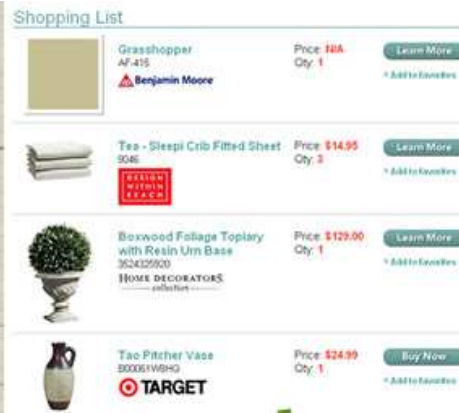
Making it easier for other consumers to follow her lead, Levine created kits that contain the necessary tools: spray bottles for mixing spray cleaner and polish, mixing jar, natural bristle scrub brush, mixer, microfibre cleaning cloth, and a bottle of Eco-Me's Home Cleaning Essential Oil. Plus, of course, instructions on how to make various products by adding oil, vinegar, water and baking soda.

Besides kits for home cleaning, Eco-Me also sells kits for making natural body, baby and pet products—currently only in the United States and Canada. While true eco warriors get their instructions online or from friends and track down ingredients from local sources, other consumers need help taking steps to greener living. Which creates opportunities for smart, eco-conscious entrepreneurs.

Website: www.eco-me.com

Contact: info@eco-me.com

Spotted by: Emma Crameri



Social shopping meets interior design

Shopping has always been a social activity, but only recently have sites like [Stylehive](#), [Crowdstorm](#) and [ThisNext](#) begun to make its social aspects explicit with ways to make recommendations, seek advice and discuss products online. Now [Design My Room](#) brings segmentation to the game with a site focused specifically on interior design.

"Give your room a makeover" is the proclaimed purpose of Design My Room, which launched into beta in August. The site lets users test out interior designs either on sample rooms provided by the site, or by uploading a photo of the real room they have in mind. They can paint, furnish and decorate the room by selecting from thousands of products—from sponsoring brands Armstrong, Benjamin Moore, Kohler, Smith & Noble, Whirlpool and others—and then dragging and dropping them wherever they want. Rooms created by professional designers are also available for inspiration and copying. Users can save multiple versions of their room and offer them up for rating and comments to friends or the site's audience at large. Then, once they've settled upon the look they like, shopping for the items they've chosen is made easy via an automatically linked shopping list, which keeps track of their selections all along.

Basic members of Design My Room are given one free project, which they can save and redesign as often as they like. A "plus" membership enables 5 projects for USD 4.95 a month, while premium members get 25 projects for USD 9.95 per month. Uploading a room photo costs an extra USD 25.

"When my wife and I renovated three years ago, we had to sign out samples from retailers and lug them around—a heavy piece of granite, a cabinet door, ceramic tiles, carpet swatches, paint chips. They must have weighed 50 pounds," explains Jesse Engle, vice president of business and product development at Massachusetts-based Swatchbox Technologies, which created DesignMyRoom.com. "Next time, we do it all on the site."

In addition to the obvious benefits for users, category-specific sites like Design My Room give brands a clear line of communication with the consumers most likely to listen. Style-forward consumers are eager to create and share content, acting as curators for peers who are looking for inspiration. Time to apply this concept to the niche of your choice!

Website: www.designmyroom.com Contact: media@swatchbox.com Spotted by: Xiujuan Pan



Auto insurance by the mile

Back in 2005, we [covered](#) Norwich Union's Pay-as-You-Drive program in the UK to charge consumers for auto insurance based on how often, when and where they use their vehicles. Starting in Texas, the United States will soon see a similar service for the first time thanks to [MileMeter](#)'s "auto insurance buy the mile."

Like Norwich Union's offering, MileMeter will use consumers' usage levels to determine how much they must pay for auto insurance. Unlike Norwich Union's, however, MileMeter will not use any kind of vehicle tracking device to record that usage. Rather, consumers will buy coverage in advance in increments of as few as 1,000 miles; when their odometer reaches the end of that increment, the coverage expires. The cost per mile varies with the geographic area and the age of the driver, but a reasonable ball park for a 30-year-old driver and minimum coverage in a midrange urban ZIP code in Texas might be 4 cents per mile, MileMeter CEO Chris Gay says. Multiple drivers in a household can also be covered for a single vehicle.

Dallas-based MileMeter will launch in Texas this summer, with plans to roll out quickly to other states, Gay says. In the meantime, it's attracted a fair bit of attention, not least because it was one of only seven finalists in the most recent Amazon Web Services Startup Challenge. Because it doesn't use gender as a basis for determining rates, MileMeter has been ardently supported by the National Organization for Women (NOW). And by rewarding drivers who use their cars less, it has the potential to make an environmental impact as well. Sounds like a win-win all around—time for more entrepreneurs to start thinking in increments!

Website: www.milemeter.com

Contact: curious@milemeter.com

Spotted by: Ozgur Alaz



Hotel as retail space

It's been a full five years since we [covered](#) Westin Hotels' Heavenly Bed program, through which it sells the same beds that guests sleep on in its rooms. Other hotel brands followed suit, selling selected products that are used in rooms, or that line up with their (boutique) style. Now, a hotel still in the planning stages aims to take the concept and apply it to *everything* on its eco-friendly premises.

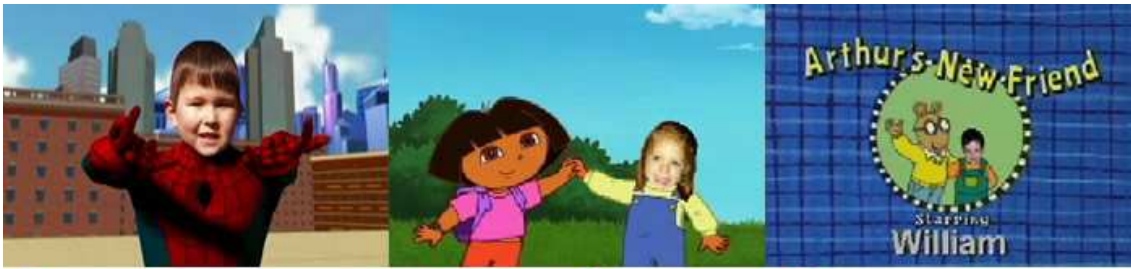
The [Emerald 5 ShowTel](#) and Conference Center is reportedly so named because it is meant to be a showcase of environmentally responsible products. Planned as part of Destiny USA's self-named retail and entertainment complex in the works in Syracuse, N.Y., the USD 450 million hotel is designed to the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum standards. Details are still scarce, but according to artist renderings the 1,300-room hotel will resemble a 39-story-tall patch of grass and feature a green facade that includes 400,000 square feet of solar panels. There will be preferred parking spots for guests who drive fuel-efficient cars, and each guest room will include low-flow showers and toilets; low-emission adhesives, paints, carpeting and composite woods; locally and sustainably sourced materials; and energy-efficient lighting and climate control.

The most unique part, however, is that virtually everything a guest might see or touch in the hotel will be for sale. Destiny will work with brands to promote their products, and consumers will have the option of sleeping in a different room each night to be able to try out as many designs and combinations as possible.

It's a well-known fact that consumers like to try before they buy—see our sister site [trendwatching.com's trysumers](#) briefing for more—and using a hotel stay to let them do that thoroughly, for a wide range of products, makes sense. While some people might balk at the idea of having their hotel rooms turned into showrooms, especially if the sales element is overly present, retail isn't just for stores anymore. Placing products in relevant settings, hybrid forms of retail like Showtel are on the rise. If you're in hospitality of any kind—or sell furniture, bedding, cosmetics, food & beverages, appliances—you'll want to explore this one.

Website: www.destinyusa.com

Spotted by: Pamela Brewer



Cartoon stardom for every child

Children can now watch themselves interact with their favourite cartoon characters, thanks to [Kideo](#)'s personalized videos. How it works? Customers either upload a photo of their child to [kideo.com](#), or go to a [Lucidion](#) retail photo kiosk and scan or upload it there. The photo is cropped down to a head shot, which is then attached to a cartoon body. A few days later, a DVD is mailed to the customer's house, with an animated movie that shows the child alongside popular cartoon icons like Dora the Explorer, Spiderman and the Care Bears. Besides featuring a child's image, his or her first name is spoken by the characters throughout the video and also appears on the packaging.

Though the DVD's static head shots lack a level of realism that would make them appealing to older kids, most small children will be delighted to see themselves on screen and to hear their name spoken by the cartoon characters. Kideo isn't the only company providing personalized media for children, of course. In December, we told you about [Flattenme](#), which produces lushly illustrated, personalized books. Kideo's videos, priced around USD 39.95, are currently only available in English. Localized versions to follow?

Website: www.kideo.com

Contact: info@kideo.com

Spotted by: Bjarke Svendsen