Who said there isn't life after death? Hard on the heels of Radiohead's 'pay what you like' experiment -- in which fans were able to decide how much (or how little) they wanted to pay for the group's latest album -- comes news that Cliff Richard is also testing new online business models. He's asking his fans to determine the price of his forthcoming meisterwerk, 'Love, the Album'. The maximum anyone will be charged is £7.99 (the price of an album on the iTunes store) but the the final price will be determined by how popular the album is -- as measured by the volume of advance orders.

Ingenious, eh? It just shows that there's still life in these old codgers. Sir Cliff says he had no choice but to embrace new technology. 'Who'd have thought I'd get a buzz from creative marketing?' he told the Daily Telegraph. 'As artists we face a stark choice. We either keep one step ahead of the technology which is changing our industry so radically – or we throw up our hands and quit. Personally I'm not for quitting.'

Right on. As if to underscore the point, Saga also announced the launch of SagaZone, a social networking site exclusively for so-called 'silver surfers', i.e. folks aged 50 or more. The site has been running for some months in a beta version and already has 16,000 users. It's really Facebook for wrinklies with all the usual stuff -- profile pages, groups, forums, etc.

This might turn out to be a shrewd business move, for two reasons. Firstly, older people have more free time. A recent OFCOM survey found that the over-50s account for 30 per cent of all time spent online by people in the UK. Secondly, they have lots of disposable income, so SagaZone might be a lucrative site for advertising. And not just for Zimmer frames either.
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Memo to investors: before putting your money into any venture ask yourself this simple question. What will happen to it if Google decides to move into the same space? Cue Facebook, which until the other day was being hyped as the biggest thing since, well, Google. But that was then and this is now. What happened is that on Wednesday Google announced that it was entering into a partnership with a posse of the smaller social networking sites to back a set of open APIs (application programming interfaces) that will give third-party developers a common standard for creating mini-programs that users can place on their profile pages. 'The strategy', wrote one astute

commentator, 'is an attempt to cut the legs out from under market leaders Facebook and MySpace, whose proprietary platforms have shown the great potential of the widget biz'.

Translation: widgets are small applications that subscribers to a social networking site can adopt and use. On Facebook, for example, there's a 'Visual Bookshelf' widget which allows users to display the books they are currently reading or hoping to read. Anyone with the requisite programming skill can write a widget, provided s/he adheres to the Facebook API. But it won't work on other sites like Bebo or MySpace -- and the owners of Facebook like to keep it that way because it corrals everyone within their own walled garden. Just like AOL used to do with its subscribers in the old days.

Google's OpenSocial initiative puts a bomb under this cosy dream. If you're a developer faced with the choice of developing a widget which will run on dozens of platforms, or one that runs only on Facebook, which are you likely to choose? Answers on the back of AOL share certificates, please.

Update: shortly before we went to press, MySpace announced that it had caved in: it will join OpenSocial too. Wonder if anyone out there still thinks Facebook is worth $15 billion.

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Visitors to technology companies in the last few months are beginning to notice that everyone in the office is running Skype, the VoIP service. I know of at least one such company -- one with over 70 employees and offices in the UK and Silicon Valley -- which has gone completely over to using Skype for communications, thereby slashing its phone bill. But there is still one gaping hole in the VoIP universe -- communications between users running Skype on their computers and 'ordinary' telephone users who don't see why they should have to boot up a PC just to make a phone call. On Friday, that gap was plugged when the 3 mobile network began selling Skype mobiles. They look and feel just like ordinary mobiles. But calls to Skype users anywhere in the world are free. Calls to non-Skype users are billed normally. What with that and the Apple iPhone arriving on November 9, it looks as though the mobile phone business has just become interesting again.