

TVs FIRST TIME BUYER'S GUIDE

Tips for dealing with the bewildering array of new screens and services. By Emile Andre

Pause the screen. Interact with the broadcast. Split the screen. Swap out between the Internet and television shows. Send and receive email (and video mail). Or run your electronic home management system.

The changes in the television industry are the most confusing of all consumer electronics. The advent of Digital Television—DTV—brings about a bewildering array of choices and possibilities.

DTV is actually 18 different formats, which have been approved by the Advanced Television Systems Committee. All the formats are a huge improvement over analog television, which will be completely phased out by 2006. The most well-known DTV format, and the only one available at all right now, is HDTV, the high-resolution format that allows larger, clearer pictures.

DTV sends a digital signal, making dozens of cool services available: Pause the screen. Interact with the broadcast. Split the screen. Swap between the Internet and television shows. Send and receive email (and video mail). Run your electronic home management system (the kind where your refrigerator says "your milk has passed date code").

These features are being introduced slowly, so don't expect this to show up tomorrow. But lots of great gear and services are available already.

Eventually, "televisions" will consist of a controller (or set-top) box, and a projection screen. Set-top boxes (like the boxes used for special cable programming) run \$200-\$300, and offer a variety of services. It's a cheap way to add functions to your TV.

If you really want a new tube now, you've got a gazillion choices. Current screens range from the amazing plasma gas models, Direct View (similar to current cathode ray tubes) or rear projection TVs (the massive home theatre setups).

Fujitsu, Philips and Pioneer make upscale plasma TVs—in the \$5000-\$8000 range (for pure video fantasy, check out Pioneer's 50-inch plasma TV, the PDP-V502MX, retailing for \$19,995).

Direct View TVs are popular, with many manufacturers offering models in the \$200 range. Rear projection models range from \$2000-\$5000. And for convenience sake there's also the portable Sony



Philips' flat screen plasma TV

Watchmans, a variety of which are available for just over \$100.

Here's a list of some cool add-ons that you can put on this year's wish list.

Internet Access on TV

WebTV (webtv.com) is an inexpensive set-top box that lets you access the Net and send email from your television. It's a simple device and cheap—under \$200—but slow. Despite its critics, sales of WebTV have soared in the last few years.



Digital VCR

Then there's the wonder called TiVo (tivo.com)—essentially a VCR without tapes. The digital device (around \$300) and the subscription fee (\$10 a month) allows you to record anything, pause and rewind—even during recording—and download movies without making an annoying Blockbuster run. Another similar service Personal TV (iwantptv.com) starts at around \$500, but includes hardware and subscription fee together.

TV Access on Your Computer

There are several video cards available that will turn your PC into a television. One favorite is the ATi TV Wonder. For \$78, it pops right into a PCI slot. There's an antenna hookup on the card itself, and presto—you're ready to watch TV on your computer screen. Cool add-ons: ATi TV Wonder supports close captioning, and can notify you about prerecorded keywords. And you can zoom in, or just use the video footage as your computer screen wallpaper.

Play Games

For millions, the most-used set-top box is a gaming console system: the Sony PlayStation (playstation.com), the

Nintendo N64 (nintendo.com) or the Sega Dreamcast (dreamcast.com). The Sony PlayStation 2 (available this fall; price TBA), threatens to redefine the category, with its built-in DVD support, Dolby Digital surround sound, ports for connecting to camcorders and modems, and other goodies.

And if you're still gaming on a small PC screen,



check out the \$99 Dobbs-Stanford Grand Teleview. Instead of splurging on a massive monitor that you can't afford or that won't fit on your desk, this scan converter lets you plug your computer into your TV. Add a wireless keyboard or a joystick, and you're set for lazy-day heaven.

NUON on DVD Players

DVD manufacturers are incorporating a technology called NUON into DVD players. A NUON-equipped deck (nuon-tech.com) can play games, use features normally accessible only on a PC and display psychedelic images when playing music. Samsung started shipping the first DVD player to feature NUON technology this summer, the Extiva DVD-N2000 (around \$400).

Three Boxes in One

Want Internet access, mondo cable stations and a VCR in one box? EchoStar has rolled everything into one unit called the DiSH Player (dishnetwork.com). This \$299 box receives satellite TV, so you can get every sporting event and movie channel under the sun and record them directly onto a built-in 17GB hard drive. If you get bored, you can always surf the Web, because the DiSH Player has a built-in modem and connects to the WebTV service, too. Monthly fees: \$20 for 40 channels, plus \$25 for WebTV service. •

For the complete chart and price comparison information for televisions, and more info about TiVo, go to steamtunnels.net and search for keyword "TV."