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Is Your TV Set to Go Digital?

by **Carrie Anton**

The day was Jan. 1, 1954, and people across the nation huddled around small 12-inch screens to watch the Tournament of Roses Parade. But it wasn't the parade that was out of the ordinary; it was the color screen it appeared on. That day marked the first coast-to-coast color broadcast in the U.S.

And just like Dorothy opening the door to Oz, black-and-white television gave way to color. Today, similar evolution is occurring as color TVs give way to high-definition.

If you have a TV, get ready to make a change.

What is HDTV?

Referred to as the "future of television," high-definition television, or HDTV, provides crystal-clear programming by using a digital service vs. the analog service of traditional TVs.

What makes one service better than the other? Clarity.

Television pictures consist of lines scanned horizontally across the screen. Not only is HDTV made up of twice as many lines, but the set is wider, like a movie-

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The push for HDTV is about improving your entertainment experience.

theater screen. This screen width more closely complements human peripheral vision, making it easier to view.

"It's as close to a movie experience in the home as possible," says HDTV consumer Brian Olsen of Highlands Ranch, Colo. "I don't watch a lot of TV, but what I do watch, I want to view the best way possible. HDTV is really what you've been seeing your whole life, just for the first time on your television set."

The 2006 national switch

According to the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), there are an estimated 11 million HDTV sets in the country, only a small number compared with the 248 million traditional TVs in households across the nation, as recorded by the U.S. Census in 2001. Despite the undertaking, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched a campaign to shift the nation's viewing experience from analog to digital.

In October 2004, FCC Chairman Michael Powell announced the digital television (DTV) consumer education campaign, "DTV--Get it!" This campaign was created to inform the public about the transition to DTV, including the availability of high-definition and other digital content.

If you have a TV, get ready to make a change.

"Although for the vast majority of American households digital television may be uncharted territory, we will not let them go it alone," said Powell. "If [consumers] have questions about digital television, the FCC is ready to serve as a primary resource for quick answers. Then we hope they will get DTV—get the set, get the connection, get the content."

Congress is assisting this initiative by setting December 2006 as a target date for broadcasters to make the transition. However, the date is predicted to slide due to the small number of U.S. households currently using HDTVs.

Making the switch to digital

The push for HDTV is about improving your entertainment experience and engaging you fully in the programming.

"Clearly, the consumer benefits from the rich experience, but operators and programmers benefit as well," says Joan Ziff, Showtime Networks Inc. director of trade and media relations. "By providing the best product available, both operators and programmers build consumer loyalty. For Showtime, high definition is one part of a vision to provide consumers with a unique television experience unlike what they can get anywhere else."

But getting the full experience comes at a price. "It costs money for everyone involved (consumers, TV producers, networks, broadcasters, and cable and satellite companies) to switch to HDTV," says Patrick Hurley, director of research at TeleChoice Inc., and co-author of "[HDTV for Dummies](#)." But remember, you don't have to spend a ton. You can buy a \$600 HDTV. Obviously not without expense, but not just the province of the super-rich these days."

The FCC predicts prices will decrease over time and will vary depending on screen size, display technology, and features. And while HDTV sets are a lot cheaper now than when they first hit the market, don't forget to factor additional costs of an antenna, tuner, and service. It adds up.

Remember, you don't have to spend a ton.

Ultimately, research is the key to getting the best digital experience. Here are some things to consider and tips to remember before taking the plunge.

- *Find a signal.* You can receive a signal through an over-the-air tuner

(which means you'll also need an antenna), a satellite system receiver, or a rental converter box from your cable company. Overall, don't get stuck with a TV for which you can't get programming.

- *Not all digital televisions are created equal.* Not all DTVs are high-definition. There are three levels of digital clarity: standard--about 50% better resolution than analog, enhanced--better than standard, but not quite as good as HDTV, and high definition--the smoothest, most lifelike experience.

"Many people think if they buy a plasma TV it will be an HDTV," says Hurley. "That is not the case. Many plasmas are actually enhanced definition televisions, which are great for playing back DVDs, but won't play HDTV in its full glory."

- *Get the most programming for your buck.* Cable and satellite providers offer a range of services at varying prices. Some providers offer more channels, but may cost more in turn. Also, be sure to find out from your provider if you'll need extra hardware. *Research is the key to getting the best digital experience.*
- *Know the facts.* The CEA and the Consumer Electronics Retailers Coalition have joined forces with the FCC campaign by offering a consumer DTV tip sheet. The tip sheet explains digital features and defines commonly used terms.

Sticking with analog

Even if you're happy with your traditional television, don't think you can tune out the high-definition trend. Once digital is fully migrated, analog broadcasting will come to an end--and so will the use of your current TV. According to the FCC fact sheet, the target date for migration completion is Dec. 31, 2006.

Don't fret! You can avoid purchasing a DTV even after the transition to digital takes place. You can use a converter set-top box, available in retail stores, to receive digital signals and adapt them to your TV's current format. While the converter will not enhance the picture display, it will save you from buying a new TV and accompanying accessories until you're ready.

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