



Breakthroughs on the Home Front

Advances in TV technology are the ticket to remarkably lifelike experiences and easy access to all types of content.

It wasn't long ago—say, a year or two—that the key to a great Super Bowl party was simple: Put your guests in front of the biggest high-definition TV you could fit into your den. Add speakers. Buy chips.

It may be 2010, but an HDTV Super Bowl is still an experience that dazzles, and it's no longer a novelty. Nearly 70 million U.S. households own an HDTV, thanks in part to the fact that big screens have become much more affordable. A 52-inch HDTV, with top-of-the-line 1080p resolution, can be found for under \$1,500, and many smaller sets can be picked up for less than half that amount.

High-definition TV is especially popular among sports fans, says the Consumer Electronics Association, noting that they comprise 71% of HDTV owners in the U.S. It's easy to see why. Advances in home theater technology—on both the audio and video sides—are a ticket to remarkably lifelike experiences, with not just stunning pictures and sound, but also easy access to all types of content. Call up scores from favorite websites, display photos from your digital albums—all without ever leaving the couch.

Out-of-the-Box Technology

One of the most exciting developments in big-screen HDTV is the emergence of LED-backlit LCD displays. If you've bought a laptop computer within the last year, you may already have seen these super-bright, startlingly vivid screens, which use light-emitting diodes as their light source. Blacks are deeper, colors are richer, and a lot less power is required. This technology also makes possible much thinner displays.

You may also want to consider an HDTV that is Internet-capable. These sets let you access web-based content—not just stock quotes and weather, but social networking sites, on-demand streaming video, and more—without even connecting to a PC. You simply plug your television into your Internet connection, and your HDTV's on-board software takes it from there. Press a

button on your remote and, depending on your TV's manufacturer, you can access sites like Twitter, Facebook, Yahoo, YouTube, and eBay. You can call up sports stats and player profiles, too—a handy option during the game.

Another feature to look for is a built-in SD card slot, which allows you to display digital photos on your HDTV simply by popping in your camera's memory card. Alternatively, you can connect a media player to your HDTV. Small boxes that sell for around \$100, they sit between your television and whatever device you use to store your digital photos, music, and videos (typically a computer or external hard disk). Using a remote and on-screen menus, you can view the contents of your media library and select whatever you want to view or hear. The great thing about media players is that they work with many different types of file formats, so you don't have to worry about time-consuming, patience-draining conversions to get

your tunes and flicks to play.

An HD-DVR is another nice addition. These devices, which can be purchased or rented for a monthly fee, connect to your TV and your cable or satellite feed, and let you pause live programming—handy when you need to take a break but the game doesn't. Monday-morning quarterbacks take note: You can record programs in full HD, too.

And then there's great sound. While the speakers built into today's HDTVs are far better than the ones you grew up with, external speakers, leveraging multiple channels of sound, can provide a remarkably rich, you-are-there sensation. Surround-sound capabilities have moved beyond the standard 5.1 channels (front left/center/right, surround left/right, and subwoofer). By adding a pair of "height" channels above the front left and right speakers, you can achieve 7.1 channels without back-surrounds, or 9.1 channels with back-surrounds. Soundbar systems,

another recent innovation, simplify installation by putting multiple speakers in a long horizontal unit that can be placed over or under the television. Using sophisticated processing techniques, soundbars can simulate the surround effect you'd otherwise need separate rear speakers to achieve. Like all home theater components, soundbars come with different capabilities (offering two, three, or even five different channels of audio) at different price points (basic units start at under \$200). They typically come with external subwoofers to deliver bass, but some soundbar vendors have simplified life here, as well, making their units wireless.

The latest breakthroughs in audio and video do an uncanny job of bringing the Super Bowl to your living room. Though you'll still have to pick up your own \$10 hot dogs.

—Alan Cohen

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