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### Rooftop antenna can deliver HD programming

By Jim Fuquay  
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

About 78 percent of North Texas households get their TV programming from either cable or satellite, according to a recent survey by Scarborough Research of Austin. That leaves the rest relying on free, over-the-air programming by broadcasters.

For those frugal folks, 15 local stations broadcast a digital signal at least some of the time, according to the National Association of Broadcasters. Buying an HDTV with an integrated tuner allows those viewers to simply plug their rooftop antenna into their HDTV and receive free HD programming.

Cable and satellite providers charge roughly \$10 a month for HD programming that is generally limited to CBS, ESPN, Discovery and movies, plus the cost of additional equipment.

"Until recently, there wasn't a lot of programming in high definition," said Myra Moore, president of Digital Tech Consulting in Dallas. And while "it's still got a long way to go," consumers can expect more programming, she said.

Hooking up a symbol of television's early days to high-tech digital equipment might sound odd, but it's the only way to enjoy free HDTV programming. And plenty of people, even those with the means to buy top-of-the-line equipment and services, are using antennae.



### IMAGES



STAR-TELEGRAM/TOM PENNINGTON, SOURCE: National Association of Broadcasters

High-definition televisions line a showroom at Marvin Electronics in Fort Worth.

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"Because we're in such a great over-the-air area, we're putting up three or four antennas a week," said Stuart Schuster, co-owner of Marvin Electronics in Fort Worth, a high-end home-theater retailer. "Almost all the prime-time programming is in HD," Schuster said, along with a good bit of weekend sports programming.

As Schuster noted, the area's flat topography makes for generally clear reception from Cedar Hill in south Dallas County, where local broadcasters' towers are clustered.

But it's not perfect.

For example, Topp Robertson, who lives in Grapevine, said that his home is in an unusually low area with a hill and large building between him and Cedar Hill. He put up a 70-foot tower to get good reception, which he readily admits was overkill. But it's what he does for a living as the owner of Applied Digital Science, where he designs and installs home theaters and other home electronics, including antennae.

Still, Robertson said, his is the odd case. For most folks, the same \$50 antenna from RadioShack that worked before on the roof or in the attic will work for HDTV, he said. (For more advice on antennae, visit [www.antennaweb.org](http://www.antennaweb.org).)

Robertson said that he thinks picking up the over-the-air HD programming is well worth it.

"It's about half the HD content, usually," that's available in the market, Robertson said.

## Cable

Cable customers don't need an antenna, but they have their own choices to make. This is where Digital Cable Ready (DCR) and CableCard come in.

A DCR HDTV set with an integrated tuner needs no set-top box to receive basic digital cable programming. That's a feature called "plug-and-play."

Another new feature of DCR is the CableCard. A television with CableCard has a slot that accepts a card, about the size of a credit card, that can be programmed to unscramble premium cable TV channels. That system also does away with the set-top box.

"Everybody wants to get rid of the box," Schuster said.

Those televisions are just coming into the market. The electronics association counted nearly 50 DCR HDTVs from its members, mostly scheduled for introduction in July. They are mostly on more expensive models, starting at about \$1,400.

Greg Gudorf, vice president of television marketing for Sony, said the manufacturer has about 20 CableCard products. He said the industry expects to sell a million CableCard sets by year's end.

"We're looking to drive HD, and we know the easiest way to get HD is through digital cable," Gudorf said. Sony is working with retailers to help explain the new technologies to the consumer, he said.

But there's also a drawback with CableCard. While it can eliminate the set-top box and perhaps an extra remote control from the coffee table, CableCard is also limited to one-way communication. That means it can't provide cable services that require two-way communications, such as pay-per-view ordering, video on demand or on-screen program schedules.

Sharan Wilson, general manager of Charter Communications' Fort Worth area cable operation, said she expects consumer adoption of CableCard to be limited, at least at first, because of that

obstacle.

"You don't need the card if you're not taking the advanced services," she said. "And if you're spending a lot of money for a set, you generally want a lot of features" that require two-way communication.

Jim Babb, spokesman for Circuit City stores, agreed.

"We feel the customers will get the best value when the tuners are fully functional cable tuners with two-way communication," Babb said.

Gudorf said he expects CableCard to gain two-way communication within two or three years.

## **Satellite**

DirecTV and DISH Network customers probably have the least need for a television with an integrated tuner. At the same time, they would have to pay the biggest added expense to receive full HD programming.

Neither DirecTV nor DISH Network has the capacity to beam HDTV programming for all the country's local TV stations, said spokesman Bob Marsocci. As a result, HD programming at DISH and DirecTV is generally limited to Mark Cuban's HDNet and HD versions of HBO, Showtime, ESPN, Discovery Channel, CBS and pay-per-view movies.

Satellite customers need a receiver that can handle the digital satellite signal captured by their pizza-size rooftop antenna and the HD signals broadcast over-the-air by local stations.

Those are available, but they're costly at \$300 and up at home electronics retailers. They also require a traditional antenna. To their credit, the satellite receivers can seamlessly switch between an over-the-air broadcast signal and the digital satellite signal.

## **The real thing**

While broadcasters have greatly expanded their HD programming, not all HD programs are created equal, said Bill Schully, engineering manager for KTVT/Channel 11 and KTVT/Channel 21. A limited number of programs are originally shot in high definition, referred to as native HD, while others are "upconverted" to HD from a standard definition source.

"We do have an HD signal 24/7" he said. But native HD is mostly limited to prime time weekdays and several hours each weekend on Channel 11, he said. Channel 21 broadcasts HDNet programming eight hours a day Monday through Friday, but only *Star Trek Enterprise* is in native HD.

**It's not a bad picture either way, he and Robertson said.**

"There is an upconverter in your \$1,500 television set. Well, we have a \$50,000 or \$60,000 piece of equipment that upconverts our signal" before it is broadcast, he said. "If you have a high-definition TV and compared it to a standard definition signal, you'll have a fairly significant difference."

What about people who are happy with their good, old-fashioned analog set? Under existing federal rules, TV broadcasters theoretically could stop transmitting conventional signals as early as 2006 or when 85 percent of U.S. households have digital sets. However, the CEA predicts only about 36 million U.S. households will have HDTV by the end of 2006, or roughly a third of households.

"There's no way we will be at 85 percent by 2006," said Moore, the Dallas consultant. She and others expect standard-definition broadcasting to continue several years after the 2006 date, and even after that consumers will be able to buy an inexpensive device that converts digital signals to analog.

### **Local HD broadcasters**

Here are local television stations that broadcast at least some programming in high definition.

Station (network) HD channel

|                  |    |
|------------------|----|
| KDAF (WB)        | 32 |
| KDFI (Ind.)      | 36 |
| KDFW (Fox)       | 35 |
| KDTX (Ind.)      | 45 |
| KERA (PBS)       | 14 |
| KFWD (Ind.)      | 51 |
| KLDT (Ind.)      | 54 |
| KPXD (PAX)       | 42 |
| KSTR (Ind.)      | 48 |
| KTVT (CBS)       | 19 |
| KTXA (UPN) 1     | 8  |
| KUVN (Univision) | 24 |
| KXAS (NBC)       | 41 |
| KXTX (Ind.)      | 40 |
| WFAA (ABC)       | 9  |

SOURCE: National Association of Broadcasters

### **Here are some common questions about high-definition television:**

#### **Q: What is high-definition television, or HDTV?**

**A:** HDTV uses digital signals to display a sharp picture with up to 1,080 horizontal lines of resolution. Standard television uses an analog signal to display a picture with 480 lines.

#### **Q: How much do HDTV sets cost?**

**A:** Prices start at about \$800 and can go to \$10,000 and up.

#### **Q: How can I get HDTV in my home?**

**A:** You need an HDTV set, an HD tuner and a way of capturing an HD signal. HDTV sets with integrated tuners are becoming more common, but more HDTV sets without HD tuners are for sale today. You can get an HD signal with a traditional rooftop antenna, cable or a satellite.

#### **Q: How much HD programming is available?**

**A:** North Texas' largest stations generally broadcast an HD signal all the time. Most of the programs are shot in standard definition and "upconverted" to HD, while ABC, CBS and NBC shoot and broadcast much of their prime-time lineup and some weekend programming in "native" HD. Upconverted HD is considered much better than standard definition, but not as good as native HD. Charter and Comcast cable services offer extensive HD programming. DirecTV and DISH Network satellite services generally limit HD programming to HD versions of CBS, HBO, Showtime, Discovery, HDNet and pay-per-view, and a new satellite provider, Voom, offers 35 channels.

**Q: What's the best HDTV?**

**A:** That's a matter of preference and pocketbook. Traditional direct-view cathode-ray tube (CRT) sets deliver sharp pictures at the lowest prices, but they are heavy, bulky and not available in larger sizes. Flat-panel plasma sets are thin and light enough to hang on a wall. They also have a bright picture and can be huge, but they are very expensive. Liquid-crystal display (LCD) sets are also thin and light with a good picture, but they are pricey and not available in larger sizes. Rear-projection sets, available in a variety of technologies, offer bright pictures and are much lighter than CRT sets, but they are bulkier and heavier than plasma and LCD sets.

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