

Cablevision to test remote DVR service

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In the continuing struggle for dominance in the digital-video-recorder market, industry giant Cablevision is about to try something different. The firm, which has offered conventional digital-cable systems and set-top boxes capable of recording content installed in subscribers' homes, will be testing a networked DVR service.

Similar to standard, home-based DVRs in function, the service will be put into a test phase over the next two months via Cablevision's 2.1 million-subscriber Long Island, New York market. The service will allow users to record and store content through Cablevision's servers as opposed to locally through a DVR box.

DVR units such as TiVo, Replay and the home-built MythTV systems allow users to record content such as television shows and store them to the unit itself to view later. The units have grown in popularity in the last several years with digital-cable providers offering their own set-top boxes to subscribers that perform similar functions.

The Cablevision plan, known as its Remote-Storage Digital Video Recorder service, allows subscribers to choose to download a show for later viewing. This explicit download option ensures that nothing is downloaded without the subscriber's authentication and helps Cablevision avoid potential legal entanglements involved with securing broadcasting rights. Cablevision has yet to announce a monthly price for its RS-DVR service.

Despite citing 80 gigabytes of storage space for each subscriber in the

test, some controversy has arisen around the test. DVR systems, which are popular for allowing users to record television content, store it within their homes and export it to devices such as PCs, burn content to a DVD or export it to a desired media format.

Where localized DVR devices have become popular, remote devices and services may be creating their own market. In November 2005 Time Warner began its "Start Over" service, which allowed users to record programs in the background providing the ability to start at the beginning of a show already in progress.

Other efforts toward creating a network DVR service have been seen in Time Warner Cable's attempt to launch "Maestro," a service that automatically stored programs on its network for subscribers to be able to download at any time. The program came under fire for never providing the user with a choice as to whether or not they'd like download content to Time Warner Cable's network, a function that was automatically performed in the background without the user's input. The service found itself on tenuous legal ground where broadcast rights were concerned and was never launched.

"Cable companies get to avoid sending someone out to install it as well as having the customer have to go to a service center for repairs," commented Ross Rubin, an analyst for the NPD Group, which focuses on consumer and retail trends. "The DVR has been the most compelling new feature that consumers have flocked to in these set-top boxes and they don't really want that box."

"I'm all for a 'better product,' so the cable company has to show me what advantages I will have by using this new system," said Erik Janniche, an account manager for USinternetworking Inc.

"Right now it just seems like the advantages are for them. So the risk of

my hard drive breaking is gone. I'm sure that risk is replaced by that of their systems crashing for a while."

"Unless this is significantly less expensive on a monthly basis than a standard digital video recorder, I don't see how this will fly," commented a user in an online bulletin board centered on the popular TiVo DVR.

"Most people I know prefer being able to see and touch the machine and have more control over it."

The user also pointed out that a localized DVR system could still function if the cable was out, thereby still providing the user access to stored shows.

Representatives from Cablevision proved unavailable for comment.

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