

Ideal set-top box would combine DVR, wireless and remote access

December 31 2008, By Etan Horowitz

Each week in the space I review gadgets and electronics and tell you which ones are worth buying. Frankly, it's a selfless job where I try to put your interests above my own. But now it's my turn.

This year, I spent a lot of time testing set-top boxes, devices that connect to your television and let you watch content from another source, such as videos from YouTube, family photos saved on a computer, movies streamed instantly from Netflix, or programming from the cable company. The thinking is that entertainment options are everywhere and consumers love their flat-screen, high-definition TVs so much that they want to watch everything on them, and they don't want to have a bunch of clunky boxes spoiling the view.

I checked out the Neuros OSD, the revamped Apple TV, the Vudu box, the Netflix Player by Roku, the LG Network Blu-ray Disc Player and the SlingCatcher. And although I didn't test them, TiVo's HD boxes are always a strong contender in the set-top box competition. I'm sure I'll see more in a few weeks at the 2009 International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

But so far none of these boxes does it all. So if any consumer electronics manufacturers are listening, here is what I would like to see in my ideal set-top box.

I realize some of these things may not be possible right now because of technical limitations, digital-rights rules, existing agreements, blah blah

blah. I don't care. That's why it's my ideal set-top box.

Like a TiVo, it needs to accept CableCards so that I can get programming from my local cable company. Like a cable-company digital video recorder or TiVo, it must have a recording function, so I can watch my favorite TV shows whenever I want. And like a Slingbox, it should let me watch my home TV from a cell phone or computer connected to the Internet.

But because I'm not always connected to the Internet when I want to watch my shows (for example, when I'm on a plane), I need to be able to take the shows I have recorded and convert them a format that I can watch on my computer or iPhone. This is a feature offered by TiVo and the Neuros OSD.

Increasingly, many of the things I want to watch are not broadcast on TV, but are found on Internet sites such as Hulu.com or YouTube, so the box has to be able to access these sites and more. Another option is to create software such as the SlingCatcher's SlingProjector that lets you wirelessly project whatever is on your computer screen to your TV.

Beyond that, sometimes I just want to watch videos or photos I've taken or video podcasts I've downloaded to my computer, so it has to let me wirelessly access media stored on the computers in my house as you can do with Apple TV and other products.

Finally, the box would let me rent or buy movies. Ideally, this would come in the form of streaming through Netflix, something that is included in most monthly plans and is now available on boxes such as TiVo, the Xbox 360, the Netflix Player by Roku and the LG Network Blu-ray Disc Player.

I purposely left out the ability to play DVDs or Blu-ray discs because I

didn't want to make this box too huge, and as all types of entertainment continue moving to a digital format, physical discs will likely become less popular.

Plus, DVD players are included on many video-game consoles, though that does mean bringing another dreaded box into the mix.

There you have it. Set-top box makers, are you listening?

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