

Bumpy road for satellite TV in cars

October 14 2009, By Stanley A. Miller II

The summer road tripping season is over, but with the holidays on the horizon, people soon will be piling into their cars for annual pilgrimages to family and friends.

For those with children, this often means many miles on the highway with ticking time bombs as youthful boredom builds. Technologies such as portable gaming systems and DVD players can alleviate the stress, but these digital diversions eventually lose their luster.

This summer, AT&T and RaySat Broadcasting launched a new satellite television service for vehicles called CruiseCast that can add a steady non-stop stream of boob tube to the backseat. All of a sudden video on the road is a renewable resource.

CruiseCast beams 22 television channels and 20 radio stations using a satellite antenna mounted on the roof and receiver stashed inside the car. The basic equipment costs \$1,299 -- TV screens not included -- and a subscription is \$28 a month.

So now, instead of enduring the same four DVDs while trekking across the country, CruiseCast offers the USA Network, Animal Planet, Cartoon Network Mobile and Disney channels. There's also programming for an older audience: CNN, ESPN Mobile, MSNBC, Discovery and SyFy also are onboard.

After a guided tour of a CruiseCast car, I can say that watching it feels a little like channel surfing at home. The service lets you click around a

channel guide using a remote to see what's on and jump to what you want. The picture looks fine on the small screens you'd expect in a [car](#), and Marcia Barnett, a RaySat spokeswoman, says it looks good on TVs of up to 25 inches.

Link up a larger set to CruiseCast, and you can watch one game while tailgating for another.

The equipment connects to most rear seat entertainment systems using standard RCA cables, so if you already have screens in the backs of the front seats, the CruiseCast gear should work. The 3-pound antenna is about the size of a smoke alarm on steroids and attaches to a vehicle's roof rails or via a magnetic mount.

Unfortunately, the current receiver has only one tuner, so you can't have different channels on several screens. Still, the show goes on even if you lose line of sight with satellite because of blocking buildings thanks to a buffering system that stores about two minutes of video. The strength of the satellite signal appears on an indicator that looks like the bars on a cell phone.

Barnett said CruiseCast can support digital video recording, pay per view, high-definition video and even Internet access, but none of those bells and whistles are in the near future.

CruiseCast isn't the first service targeting those on the road. KHV Industries' TracVision pulls down DirecTV satellite service to moving vehicles _ although losing sight of the satellite causes blips in the picture. And many mobile phones can pull down real-time television over cellular networks.

Andy Schroeder, owner of Project Two Customs, said he hasn't sold a CruiseCast system -- even though he's listed as a dealer -- because when

the company's representatives visited months ago to sell the system, they couldn't get it to work. Schroeder says his company sells plenty of TracVision packages even though they are more expensive.

"A lot of our customers are high-end clients, and they want all of the channels of DirecTV," Schroeder said. "The TracVision, it works great if you are in open areas. And when you are driving north and south, you have a clear southern view of the satellite, and it's perfect reception. But people coming from a home with satellite that always works need to know it is not the same when you are in motion, there is stuff that blocks it."

Schroeder said that although CruiseCast didn't make a good first impression, he thinks it has plenty of potential, especially if the buffering system is solid. He also noted that a TracVision system is a "pretty big jump in price," running about \$3,000.

"I think it is a great piece," Schroeder said about CruiseCast. "It is a nice niche for a minivan or SUV family that uses it around town."

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