

Staggering options complicate TV purchases

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Shopping for a television set these days is anything but easy. I know because I just bought an HD TV.

I tend to do a lot of research before buying tech products. But shopping for televisions is much more complex than shopping for most other tech gadgets because there are so many brands, models and features to pick from - and so few reliable guides for choosing among them.

Don't be surprised if you find yourself - like I did - trying to pick a TV by staring at a bank of them in a showroom, the tech equivalent of inspecting a car by kicking its tires.

Even if the process is filled with pitfalls, though, there are good ways to narrow down your search. A good place to start is price, because it can constrain all of your other options.

TV prices vary widely, but you can get a very good, top-brand, 55-inch television for less than \$2,000 and a 46-inch model for less than \$1,500. You might spend hundreds of dollars less - or more - than that, though, depending on what brand, technology or features you choose.

It can pay to be patient and shop around. Prices vary widely from store to store, and they can jump or fall from week to week. The set I ended up purchasing was priced at \$1,200 at Best Buy one week and \$1,300 the next. I found the same model at Fry's for \$1,000.

And better prices may be just around the corner. A report from The

Wall Street Journal indicated that big retailers such as Wal-Mart and Best Buy are in the process of slashing prices on older TV models as they prepare for deep discounts on newer ones in coming weeks.

Another big factor to consider is screen size. Generally the bigger the screen, the more cinema-like your living room will be. But the bigger you go, the more you'll spend. And there are practical limits; some TVs can be so big that they dominate a room. Also, with bigger TVs, the closer you sit, the grainier the picture will look.

Technology review site CNET.com has a decent rule of thumb for picking the right-sized screen for your room. It's based on how far from it you'll be sitting. CNET's advice is that you want a screen whose diagonal measurement that is half to two-thirds of that distance.

So if you'll be sitting about 6 feet (or 72 inches) from your TV, you should probably be looking for a TV with a diagonal measurement of between 36 and 48 inches.

Another way to narrow your search is to figure out what technology you want in your TV. These days, unless you're shopping for a jumbo-sized [television](#) that's 65 inches or larger, you'll likely be choosing either a plasma or an LCD TV.

Plasma screens tend to be cheaper than comparably sized LCDs, and they have richer blacks and often do a better job of displaying rapid motion smoothly. They also tend to offer wider viewing angles.

But plasma TVs typically use far more energy than LCDs, their screens can look dim or reflect glare in bright rooms, and they often are thicker. There also are fewer of them on the market, so consumers have less to choose from.

By contrast, LCD TVs tend to offer brighter colors, much better power efficiency, far thinner screens and a greater variety of sizes, brands and features. On the flip side, they don't do a great job of producing blacks, particularly in dark rooms, and they have narrower viewing angles.

A third TV technology, dubbed LED TV, has gotten a lot of press over the past couple of years. But LED TVs are really just LCDs that use LED lights for illumination, rather than fluorescent tubes. Their advantage is that they are even more efficient and thin than standard LCDs. But they also are significantly more expensive without typically offering significant improvements in picture quality.

Beyond price, screen size and technology, you'll also want to consider features. The more you pay, the more features you get, but typically in a staggered fashion. A screen resolution of 1080p has become standard on LCD TVs 40-inches or bigger, but entry models typically have a 60-hertz refresh rate, which is the frequency at which the image is redrawn on the screen.

Every \$100 to \$200 above the base price of a set you'll get new features, starting with a 120-hertz refresh rate, which can do a better job of smoothing fast-motion video. After that comes LED-backlighting, the ability to connect to the Internet to stream movies from Netflix or play music from Pandora, and, at the top of the line, the ability to display stereoscopic three-dimensional images.

Now it's time to pick a brand and model. And this is perhaps the trickiest part because there aren't a lot of good guideposts. There are so many individual TV models on the market that few of the standard technology publications have reviewed anything close to a comprehensive list of current TVs.

However, they do offer some good clues. Consumer Reports, for

example, ranks TV brands by their reliability, based on how many problems the magazine's readers have reported. You can look at how individual brands score in the rankings on Consumer Reports, CNET and other sources. Even if the site hasn't looked at the model you are interested in, it frequently will have reviewed a similar one.

Even after all that, though, you may still end up stumped. I thought I knew what I wanted to buy - a 46-inch LED LCD TV from Samsung. But when I got to Best Buy, I saw a Sony TV I wasn't familiar with that had similar features for the same price. I ended up going back home and doing more research, looking at the ratings of the Sony TV, before sticking with my original choice.

In the end, I like my new TV, but I still don't know whether I made the best decision. Even after narrowing down my options and doing my research, I think I ended up buying as much on my good opinion of Samsung and my fascination with the sheer thinness of LED TVs as anything else. Here's hoping my TV stays clearer and sharper than the process of purchasing it.

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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