

# Gadgets for free TV arrive, but will buyers bite?

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An LG 3-D Mobile DTV and cell phone are seen fitted with mobile digital television antennas which receive digital signals via wifi from a digital television receiver, Friday, Jan. 7, 2011 at the International Consumer Electronics show in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/Julie Jacobson)

(AP) -- Being able to watch live TV on the go sounds like an appealing idea. Indeed, Audiovox Corp. says its RCA-branded portable, battery-powered televisions sell well. But there's a problem: people return them at extremely high rates. Why?

"If you move, you lose the signal completely," said [Audiovox](#) Electronics president Tom Malone. That's because digital TV signals are designed to be received by stationary antennas. If the antenna starts moving, the

signals become gibberish.

The solution is a new type of TV signal known as Mobile DTV that TV broadcasters are starting to roll out. Many cities already have a couple of stations live. Audiovox said this week that it will build receivers for those signals into its 7-inch and 9-inch portable TV sets this year, joining several other manufacturers in trotting out Mobile DTV gadgets at the International [Consumer Electronics Show](#) in Las Vegas. That means that this year, consumers will for the first time have an array of Mobile DTV gadgets to choose from. The technology's future is far from certain, and this year's sales figures might well be crucial.

Most of the Mobile TV gadgets at the show add a receiver to a device that already does something else. For instance, Valups, a Korean company, is making an antenna that plugs into the iPad's connection port, turning it into a 9.7" inch portable TV, no Internet connection necessary. It expects to sell it in June for \$99. One wrinkle: the Tivizen, as it's called, has a battery of its own and needs to be charged to provide two to three hours of viewing.

iMovee Corp. of San Diego was at the show with the Mobeo, a gadget the size of a smart phone that grabs a Mobile DTV signal and rebroadcasts it over Wi-Fi so that it can be picked up by iPhones, iPads, and Android phones and tablets such as the Samsung Galaxy Tab. It gets three hours on a charge and is expected to cost \$149 when it launches in June.

Cydle, another Korean company, has a Mobile DTV receiver that doubles as an external battery for an iPhone, providing both a TV signal and extra power. It also showed a car navigation unit that doubles as a TV set, presumably not for use while driving (taxi drivers watching TV while driving is a common sight in some countries, including Taiwan).

Other manufacturers showed antennas that plug into laptop USB ports. Unlike the [iPad](#) antenna, they don't contain batteries and don't need charging.

Apart from Audiovox, the only big-name manufacturer betting on Mobile DTV is LG Electronics Inc., which launched the first Mobile DTV gadget in the U.S. late last year, a portable DVD player that did double duty as a TV set.

At the show, LG displayed Android smart phones with extendable antennas. They're able to receive Mobile DTV without any add-on gadgets. However, no U.S. wireless carrier has signed up to sell the phones, pointing to a big problem for the adoption of Mobile DTV. The carriers are focused on selling wireless broadband, which can also be used to watch video, and they don't have much interest in providing customers with a way to tune into free signals.

Some carriers have experimented with paid [mobile TV](#). AT&T Inc. and Verizon Wireless teamed up with Qualcomm Inc. to sell a subscription-based service, FLO TV. It's been available on a few phones and on portable TV units. But the companies never found enough people willing to pay \$10 to \$15 per month for the dozen channels that were available, and Qualcomm is shutting down FLO TV this year.

The Open Mobile Video Coalition, which represents broadcasters and equipment makers, points out that Mobile DTV is different because it's free and it has local channels, including valuable news, traffic and weather reports. Participating broadcasters retransmit their main signals as Mobile DTV, so the programming is the same as on regular TV. For broadcasters, it's reasonably cheap to add a mobile signal to their towers.

In a trial with about 350 users in Washington, D.C., last summer, it found people watched Mobile DTV a lot in a surprising place: the home.

Users found it convenient to have a small portable screen for casual viewing in the kitchen and other places away from the living room TV.

If Mobile DTV is going to catch on, it had better do so fast. Because few people watch broadcast TV compared to cable or satellite, the Federal Communications Commission has started to look at ways to encourage or pay broadcasters to shut down their TV towers and turn their space on the airwaves over for mobile broadband use. Wireless broadband is an incontrovertible success, and carriers will eventually want more spectrum.

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