

Review: TV video-calling gadget costs too much for too little

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You may have already placed a video call from your computer or from your smartphone. In the future you may make such calls from your television.

That's the vision of [startup company](#) Tely Labs. Earlier this year the Menlo Park, Calif., company released a new device that allows consumers to make video calls through [Skype](#) on their TVs.

The device, dubbed telyHD, is no simple webcam - and at \$250, it isn't priced like one either. Instead, it's essentially a digital set-top box that happens to have a camera. It runs a version of the Android operating system, is built around a [dual-core processor](#), connects directly to the Internet and allows you to plug in both SD cards and USB drives. And thanks to an update, it has some new tricks, including a built-in Web browser.

But the core feature of the device is its ability to make video calls. Other companies, including some television manufacturers, offer [gadgets](#) that also make video calls. But telyHD is one of the first systems available that can be used with most HD televisions - not just with a specific brand of them or just with [smart TVs](#) - and that connects to a mainstream video calling service such as Skype.

TelyHD is easy to set up. It comes with a grip that allows you to attach it to the top of your television. Once you have it in place and plugged in, you can connect it to your [router](#) either through an Ethernet cable or via Wi-Fi. After that, you simply log into your Skype account.

Once logged in, you'll see the telyHD's "home screen," which consists of a virtual "carousel" of contact cards composed of your Skype buddies. Using the remote, you can flip between the cards, which tell you whether your buddies are online and whether they, too, are using a telyHD. Although you can make video calls to friends who are using phones or computers, calls that are made to other telyHD devices are streamed in the highest resolution.

It's fairly easy to make a call. You just highlight your friend's card and press a button on the device's remote. If the friend picks up, telyHD splits your TV screen so that you see your friend on one side, and yourself on the other.

Assuming you make a call to someone who is also using a telyHD, you can share pictures with them, whether they are stored on an SD card, a USB drive or an iPhone or an iPad. With the recent update, telyHD became one of the first non-Apple devices to which users can beam pictures from their Apple handheld gadgets.

I've placed several video calls through telyHD, and it worked fairly well. The audio was smooth, and the video was pretty good on telyHD-to-telyHD calls. On a call made from an iPad to the telyHD, the image on the television was more blurry because it was stretched across a big screen. Still, in both cases, making calls was quick and easy.

Tely Labs has much bigger plans for the telyHD than just making video calls. Its new browser allows you to surf the Web on your TV and to access sites and video that are difficult or impossible to view on your television using other devices. Because telyHD supports Apple's photo beaming technology, you can also use the device to display photo slideshows on your [television](#). And in the future, you might be able to do much more, because Tely Labs plans to allow users to run Android apps on the device.

Right now, though, telyHD costs too much and does too little.

While it connects to Skype, it won't let you connect to any other video calling service. You can't make calls using Tango, Apple's FaceTime, Google Talk or anything but Skype. And even its Skype connection has limitations.

Although Skype is now connected to Facebook's chat service, you can't make calls to your Facebook contacts on telyHD. The device also lacks support for Skype's group calling feature. And there's no way to know when looking at your Skype contacts who aren't using a telyHD whether they are available for a video call or just an audio one.

Stephan Ilberg, Tely Labs' vice president of marketing, said Skype hasn't opened up access to those features to outside developers.

But the telyHD has other limitations. The slideshow feature only works with Apple handheld devices. You can't beam pictures to it from an Android [smartphone](#) or from your PC, nor will it display pictures stored on an external card or drive.

Meanwhile, telyHD's version of a [Web browser](#) for TVs is difficult to use, and sometimes pages don't look right or you can't access videos or other elements within them.

And at \$249, the telyHD is more than twice the price of the Apple TV or a Roku box, devices that offer far more entertainment features, if not actual video calling.

Unfortunately, if you really want to make [video calls](#) on your TV and don't yet have a smart TV, the telyHD is one of your few alternatives. Here's hoping Tely Labs continues to improve it and that we see other options soon.

TELYHD:

-Troy's rating: 5.0 out of 10

-What: Video calling system for televisions

-Likes: Simple setup, easy to use, high-quality video when calling other telyHD devices, ability to share pictures and display slideshow, works with most HD televisions.

-Dislikes: Pricy; lacks support for Skype's group-calling feature and its connection to Facebook; doesn't support video calling services other than Skype; photo sharing only works with other telyHD devices; photo beaming only works with Apple devices; remote app only available for Apple devices.

-Specs: [HD](#) camera, 4 mics with noise cancellation; built-in speakers; dual-core 1 GHz processor.

-Price: \$250

-Web: tely.com

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