

# A guide to buying a TV for the holidays

November 22 2012, by Troy Wolverton

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With numerous brands, technologies, features and sizes to choose from - not to mention a wide range of prices - picking a TV can be a major headache. So to help guide you through the process, I've listed some things to keep in mind if you're shopping for a TV this holiday season.

**PRICE:** You can spend anywhere from less than \$100 for a small-screen, low-end model to \$25,000 for a jumbo-sized set with all the latest [features](#), so you're sure to find a [TV](#) to match your [budget](#).

In general, as you go up in price, you'll find larger screens, more features and sleeker designs. But there can be trade-offs. Some full-featured 46-inch models cost twice as much as some entry-level 60-inch sets.

On a recent tour of big-box stores, I found 32-inch models starting at around \$200, 46-inch ones at around \$480 and 60-inch sets at around \$800. But those were basic models with few features. Expect to spend much more for sets that have faster refresh rates or "[smart TV](#)" features or are 3-D ready.

At [Best Buy](#), for example, the least expensive 46-inch model with a 120Hz refresh rate is \$550, while the least expensive one with smart TV features and 3-D is \$800.

**SCREEN SIZE:** You can find TVs that range from 7-inch portables to mammoth 84-inch models. Which size you choose will depend a lot on where you want to put it - and how much you want to spend.

In the early years of high-definition televisions, analysts offered guidelines for picking the right size of TV for your room based on how far you intended to sit from it. These days, those rules have mostly been set aside as Americans have gravitated toward ever-larger screens. As NPD Group analyst Ben Arnold put it, "You'll never get a TV home and say, 'Gosh, honey, the TV's too big.' "

I tend to agree. When I bought a 46-inch TV two years ago, I worried it would be too large for my smallish living room. Now I wish I had bought an even larger model.

Fortunately, large-screen models are much more affordable than ever before. For the same \$1,000 I spent two years ago, I could now get a 55-inch model with similar features or better.

**TYPES:** These days you can generally choose from two basic TV technologies: LCD and plasma. LCDs, meanwhile, come in two flavors: those with fluorescent tubes for backlights and those with LED backlights, which are often marketed as "LED TVs."

In the past two years, these LED TVs have taken over the market. You'll find them in all screen sizes. While LED backlighting was once a premium feature, you'll now find it standard on the large majority of midrange models and even on some entry-level ones.

By contrast, fluorescent backlit LCD technology is now predominantly found on TVs that are smaller than 50 inches, and usually on entry-level models.

LED TVs tend to be more expensive than comparably equipped plasma or regular LCD TVs. But they are significantly thinner, and tend to be more energy-efficient. And to my eye, the images they produce are more colorful, particularly compared with those produced by plasma displays.

Plasma TVs range in size from about 42 inches to 65 inches, but the lion's share have 50-inch screens.

The standard rule of thumb is that LCD and LED TVs are better for brightly lit rooms, while plasma TVs are better for less well-lit ones. One thing to note, though, is that choosing a plasma TV can save you lots of money. They tend to be priced hundreds of dollars less than comparable LED TVs with the same size and features.

**FEATURES:** The most notable add-on features you'll find on TVs these days are faster refresh rates, 3-D viewing options and "smart TV" capabilities. Of these, the most important for LCD TVs in my book is speedier refresh rates.

"Refresh rate" refers to the frequency with which a television updates the image on the screen. A 60-hertz refresh rate means the television is updating the image 60 times a second.

With fast motion, the image on a TV screen can blur at slower refresh rates. Faster ones, by contrast, typically yield more fluid motion. As you go up in price, you'll see refresh rates as fast as 480Hz on LCD TVs. But Consumer Reports says that consumers likely won't notice much of a difference beyond 120Hz.

I'm not as big of a proponent of 3-D TVs. Even after all the 3-D hype of the last couple years, there's still little 3-D content available.

The glasses have improved and dropped in price, but you still have to wear them to get the 3-D effect, they're still awkward and you still have to have a pair of glasses for everyone who wants to watch. And all that to get an image that - to my view - typically looks like cardboard cutouts. No thanks.

I'm more receptive to smart TV features. There's a lot of Internet content that consumers want to watch on their big-screen TVs and having Internet connectivity and apps built into televisions makes that easier. But the average smart TV costs about \$350 more than the average not-so-smart model. That premium just isn't worth paying when you consider that you can access similar content via Apple TV, the Roku player or other digital set-top boxes that cost between \$50 and \$100.

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

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