

Review: New TiVo delivers for avid TV viewers

August 20 2013, by Anick Jesdanun



This image provided by TiVo Inc. shows a TiVo Roamio DVR, one of the companies new digital video recorders. TiVo Inc. announced a new line of digital video recorders Tuesday, Aug. 20, 2013, to give television viewers more control over what they watch on traditional channels and over the Internet. (AP Photo/TiVo Inc.)

When I bought my first TiVo digital video recorder in 2001, I was a real

trendsetter. "You can really pause live television?" friends asked with wonder. "You don't have to rewind a tape when you're done?"

I don't get those questions anymore, now that digital video recorders are common and have replaced video cassette players in many living rooms. Cable and satellite TV companies typically offer packages that include DVR service, making TiVo redundant. Yet the company that pioneered the device 14 years ago keeps churning out new products.

The latest is the Roamio family of DVRs, the fifth-generation TiVos. These new DVRs, unveiled Tuesday, give you much more than what you can get through your cable or satellite company. That includes the ability to watch recorded shows when you're away from home, starting this fall.

But you'll also pay much more for the experience—\$400 for the mid-range model, plus a monthly service fee of \$15. By contrast, you can often get DVR service through your TV provider for a comparable monthly fee, with no extra equipment to buy.

Either way, you can pause [live television](#) to answer the phone or the door. You can rewind live sporting events and create your own replays. Get home 15 minutes late? You can start watching a show from the beginning as it's still being recorded.

Where TiVo has excelled is in helping you find programs to record. You can create wish lists of favorite actors and have TiVo automatically record movies or talk shows they appear in. You can also do the same with keywords, such as "national park" or "dolphins." You can even have TiVo offer suggestions based on your past viewing, though I have found its picks dubious at times.

TiVos also integrate TV shows and movies from Internet video services such as Netflix Inc., Amazon.com Inc. and Hulu. When you search for

"Breaking Bad," for instance, you get a list of episodes the AMC channel is showing over the next two weeks plus all the episodes available on Netflix or Amazon. To watch through TiVo, you still have to get a Netflix subscription or buy individual episodes through Amazon, but it's good to know the past episodes are available. You can also search for related video on YouTube and see what other shows cast members from "Breaking Bad" are in.

The new TiVo has all that, plus suggestions on what to watch now, rather than just what to record in the future. It's based partly on what other TiVo users are watching at the moment or have watched in that time slot in the past.

Roamio also lets you customize the on-screen television listings. If you're in the mood for a movie, you can have TiVo show you just the movies when you scroll through the listings. You can customize that further and scroll through just comedies or documentaries, if you want. Instead of movies, you can also scroll through just sports, news shows or kids programming.

As is the case with previous TiVos, if there are channels you never watch, such as something in Korean or Russian, you can have TiVo remove them from your lineup. Shows on those channels will be filtered out of listings and searches. You can also do that with Internet services you have no interest in paying for.

Roamio also has a number of hardware improvements, mostly on the mid-level Roamio Plus (\$400) and the high-end Roamio Pro (\$600):

— Those two models will let you watch live or record up to six shows at once. That's up from a maximum of four. (The \$200 base model has four tuners, up from two.)

— Both will let you watch your recorded shows on an iPhone or iPad. Before, you needed a separate \$130 TiVo Stream box. Streaming is currently limited to iPhones and iPads connected to your home wireless network, but TiVo will start offering out-of-home streaming this fall. Users will be able to stream video in various ways, including through a hotel Wi-Fi on the road. Android streaming is promise by early next year.

— All three models come with a remote that uses radio signals rather than an infrared beam. What that means is you don't have to point the remote at the TiVo.

— All three models also have Wi-Fi built in, so you no longer need to attach an Ethernet cable or buy a separate TiVo Wi-Fi adapter for \$90.

— The Roamio offers speed improvements over the previous model, which you'll notice when navigating menus. That said, the system did hang on me for a few seconds now and then as TiVo sifted through all the data.

The base model comes with 500 gigabytes of storage, enough for 75 hours of high-definition recordings. The Plus model, which is the one I reviewed, has 1 terabyte for 150 hours, while the Pro has 3 terabytes for 450 hours. That's nearly 19 days of TV without any sleep. There's even more room for non-HD recordings.

If you bought a new TiVo recently, you probably don't need to upgrade. If you want the streaming, you can simply buy the TiVo Stream device. It will get out-of-home streaming, too, when that's available. You can also get a device called the Slingbox, which essentially mirrors over the Internet what's being shown on your home TV. TiVo has at least one advantage over the Slingbox: It lets you and whoever's home watch different shows.

Roamio also isn't for you if you don't watch a lot of television, whether through traditional channels or over the Internet. It would be like going to a five-star restaurant when all you want is bread.

But Roamio is a worthwhile investment if you have hundreds of television channels and Internet [video services](#) and can't figure out where to start. It does much more than a cable or satellite provider's DVR.

One major caveat: It doesn't work with satellite TV or with video service through AT&T's U-verse.

And it does assume you'll keep your cable service. While the base model can accommodate over-the-air broadcasts, the Plus and the Pro models can't process signals from antennas. You would be stuck with TiVo as a streaming device, which isn't the device's strong suit. Both Roku and Apple TV offer access to many more Internet services than TiVo. TiVo is largely limited to Netflix, Hulu Plus, Amazon.com and a few others.

Meanwhile, game machines such as the Wii U and phones such as Samsung's Galaxy S4 offer apps that let you find shows and control the TV from the device. TiVo can replace your TV's remote, too, but it's expensive if that's all you want.

I have stopped channel surfing since I got my first TiVo in 2001. There's always something better to watch now that TiVo has helped me find and record programming. After just a few hours with Roamio, I was discovering even more shows and movies I want to watch.

And with streaming video, it does a good job of finding all that content. With one search, I can tell that Netflix has only the first four and a half seasons of "Breaking Bad." That same search tells me that if I want more recent episodes, I need to buy them through Amazon Instant Video or wait for reruns on AMC. With Roku, I have to search for online content

one service at a time.

You can probably cobble together a bunch of services and devices that do what TiVo does. With the new Roamio, TiVo is the one that does it all and does it well.

ABOUT TIVO'S ROAMIO:

The fifth-generation DVRs from TiVo Inc. comes in three flavors: a \$200 basic model with 75 hours of high-definition recording, a \$400 Roamio Plus with 150 hours and a \$600 Roamio Pro with 450 hours. All three require TiVo service, which costs \$15 a month with a one-year commitment, \$20 a month with no commitment or a one-time payment of \$500 for the life of the device.

The Plus and the Pro come with the ability to stream recorded shows on iPhones and iPads, with Android support to come. Initially limited to when you are connected to your home Wi-Fi network, the feature will work at hotels, at work and elsewhere this fall. The streaming feature replaces the need for a \$130 TiVo Stream box. All three Roamio versions expand on TiVo's strengths in helping viewers find shows.

The Roamios are available online through TiVo, Amazon.com Inc. and Best Buy starting Tuesday. They will also hit Best Buy's physical stores in the coming weeks.

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