

Review: TiVo's latest model makes it easier to bolt from cable

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The first thing you'll notice about the TiVo Bolt is its odd shape - it looks like someone bent the case in an industrial press.

In a call with the Bolt's product manager, I asked why the case was not level. I said it wouldn't play nice in my home theater cabinet because it

would be difficult to stack other components on top of it.

I was told that the unique shape helps keep the Bolt cool as air is drawn in from the bottom and that the Bolt was designed to be the only box in your TV cabinet.

I guess he was right.

The Bolt and the new Bolt+ are TiVo's latest models that are designed to replace your cable box/DVR and your streaming box (Apple TV, Roku).

One box to rule them all.

I've used TiVo boxes on and off through the years when my TV service offered them, but lately TiVo has concentrated on cable TV systems.

I can't use a TiVo box with my U-Verse service, but cable and FiOS customers can use a Bolt or Bolt+ instead of their cable box by installing a cable card. Just tell your cable or FiOS company you want a cable card instead of a box.

The card slips into a slot inside the Bolt.

But wait, there's more.

Every time I do a cord-cutting article, people write in to ask me about recording options.

The Bolt has over-the-air tuners so you can watch and record over-the-air, high-definition local channels.

So the Bolt is great for cable or FiOS customers and for cord cutters.

The TiVo Bolt has four tuners and a 500-gigabyte or 1-terabyte hard drive, so you can record up to four shows at once.

The Bolt+ has six tuners and a 3-TB hard drive, but the Bolt+ loses the OTA tuner. It's cable or FiOS-only.

Both Bolt models can record and play back 4K programming.

TiVo has always been known for making the best-looking, easy-to-use user interface for watching and recording TV. Its guide data and on-screen menus are hard to beat.

And if being a TiVo with over-the-air recording isn't enough, the Bolt and Bolt+ are also streaming boxes that let you watch Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, HBO Go and lots of other content.

So, let's review - cable recording, over-the-air recording, streaming content. Sounds good.

This really could be the only box you need.

What else does it do?

TiVo hasn't been just happy to make a DVR - it added some truly interesting features to make watching TV more enjoyable.

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Because TiVo controls the guide data, it can aggregate all the TV sources when you search for a program or set up a season pass for a show.

According to TiVo, setting up a OnePass tracks down every available season and episode of a show - whether it's on television or a streaming

app - and creates a customizable watchlist for you.

Searching for the show Friends would show all stations showing reruns plus the streaming episodes available on Netflix.

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The Bolt and Bolt+ are three times as fast as previous TiVo models, 33 percent smaller and have three times the memory of previous TiVo models.

They also have a feature called QuickMode that speeds up video playback by 30 percent while keeping voices sounding normal. It's strange at first, but it works well.

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TiVo used to stay away from making it too easy to skip commercials. Sure, you could fast-forward, but it required quick reactions when the show resumed.

Now TiVo has a feature called SkipMode that can perfectly skip entire commercial blocks with the press of a button.

SkipMode works by having a TiVo employee watch a show and mark the beginning and end of each commercial break. Because it's labor-intensive, TiVo only offers commercial skipping on the top 20 channels, (major networks like ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox, and cable channels like AMC, Comedy Central, Discovery, TBS and History.)

SkipMode is also only available for prime-time shows.

Because humans are doing the work, SkipMode isn't available as you

watch live. You'll have to wait a bit after the show airs and the green SkipMode icon appears in the guide data.

It works like magic. You'll find yourself reaching for the skip button on the remote all the time.

The TiVo "peanut" remote is very comfortable and easy to use, and it uses RF (radio frequency) technology instead of IR (infrared) so you don't need line of sight to control the Bolt. You can tuck it inside a cabinet or in a media closet and it will still respond to remote commands.

And in a stroke of genius, if you lose the remote, pressing a small button on the back of the Bolt will cause the remote to play a tone so you can find it.

The Bolt or Bolt+ can act as the main recorder for multi-room setups. If you have other TVs in your home, you can add a TiVo Mini and watch the Bolt's recorded content in other rooms.

You can also get a TiVo app for Amazon Fire TV boxes so you can watch on another TV in your home.

The Bolts can also stream TiVo content across the internet to your mobile devices and you can watch live TV or stream your recordings. You can even download recorded shows to your devices to watch while you're away from internet service.

If you know anything about TiVo, you know that there's a monthly service fee for the guide data and other features. You're paying for the convenience of SkipMode and all the other TiVo goodies.

TiVo is using a little different pricing model for the Bolt and Bolt+. Instead of a monthly fee, the Bolt's purchase price includes the first year of TiVo service.

The Bolt comes in two models: 500 GB for \$199.99 and 1 TB for \$299.99. The Bolt+ has a 3 TB hard drive and costs \$499.99.

After the first year, TiVo service is \$14.99 a month or \$149.99 per year.

You can also buy lifetime service for \$549.99.

There's no denying the TiVo Bolt is a great box, but it's also a pricey one.

The TiVo has never been a low-end option, but the features included in the service are certainly worth paying for.

You just have to determine whether the price is right for you.

I can't think of an easier way to set up over-the-air reception and recording, and the addition of the streaming services is a bonus.

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TiVo Bolt

Pros: Cable and over-the-air recording, streaming services, great playback features

Cons: Expensive

Bottom line: TiVo has always been one of the slickest DVR solutions, and the Bolt is no exception.

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