

Eye on electronics: Making sure you get your money's worth

4 February 2009, By Langston Wertz Jr.

Buying electronics can be an awfully tough decision, especially in this economy where every dollar counts. With people cutting back on going out for entertainment, what's available around the house - such as the television, computer and video games - takes on added importance.

If you're in the market for "fun" toys, or are ready to start saving for some, you want to make sure you have the right ones. But when you go into stores, you're confronted with so many options.

How can you be sure you're getting your money's worth?

And did you know you can download high-definition movies from most pay-TV services that rival your local movie house for quality? Some of the pay services deliver those pay-per-views in a new format, 1080p, that matches those new fancy Blu-ray Discs that you can rent at Blockbuster.

Today, we'll examine several popular technology options - including computers, high speed Internet and pay-TV services - to help guide you through the gobs of information available. That way, you can make the best choices for your home.

SATELLITE VS. CABLE

Satellite or cable TV for your home? This is one of the oldest technology arguments out there. If you do not own an HDTV and don't plan on buying one, both services are about equal and will allow you to watch TV after the digital transition next month. But if HD is your bag, or if you think it might be soon, there are a few things you should know.

Cable advantages: "No contract, no equipment to buy" is the cable man's mantra. Some cable providers have superior video-on-demand services that you can't get on a dish. Time Warner Cable, for example, offers a new feature called "Start Over" that will allow viewers to restart shows

already in progress so they don't miss a minute. You don't need a clear line of sight to the direction of the signal, as with satellite, to get service. And best of all, with many providers you can bundle cable, phone and Internet for a discounted price.

Satellite advantages: The picture looks better, especially on non-HD channels (though some cable companies are starting to convert to all-digital, like satellite). The selection and variety of high-def content is currently much wider on satellite. The two major satellite providers, DirecTV and DISH, offer more than 100 HD channels.

Knockout blow: Equipment issues may arise. For example, Time Warner's equipment problems are frequently talked about on message boards, and I've experienced them myself. The HD-DVRs, particularly, can be troublesome. DISH and DirecTV equipment tends to run better and be more reliable, and the HD choices those companies provide are hard to beat. For sports fans, DirecTV also has NFL Sunday Ticket, giving you access to out-of-market NFL games. Plus, both sat-casters are starting to offer 1080p high-definition movies on pay-per-view, mimicking the sound and advanced picture quality of Blu-ray. Oh, and satellite prices are cheaper in the long run, too.

Winner: Satellite. Embrace your dish.

WIRED OR WIRELESS NETWORKING?

So you've got multiple computers and everyone in the family wants to get on the Internet at the same time. You need a network. But what kind?

Wireless advantage: Portability. With the advent of Wireless-N routers, you get much faster speeds than ever before (provided your computer is new enough to have an N card built in or you've purchased an outboard card). Securing your network is pretty easy, and the measures should be enough to thwart any normal user from trying to

access your network. And with wireless, you can get spotty and can suffer from slow upload times. That Internet access from anywhere in your home, or even in your backyard, leaves you with DSL or cable.

Wired network advantage: Security, security, security. And speed. Wireless networks sometimes work great, and sometimes just don't. And if you don't secure your network, your next-door neighbor could be downloading something using your account that you might not approve of. But wired systems can be expensive (hiring someone to run wire in your attic and crawlspace and walls), or a serious do-it-yourself job. Still, once you're plugged in via the Ethernet cable, speeds can be blazing fast.

Knockout blow: Either system has its cost. Buying a new N router and new cards can set you back several hundred dollars. Wiring a system is expensive, too. But products like Netgear's Powerline HD Plus Ethernet Adapter Kit make setting up a cheap wireless network easy. Simply plug one into an AC outlet near your router and the other near the device you wish to network and voila! - it's connected. You can set up the device in the front or back yard, in the office or kitchen. I got speeds as fast as those I would normally get directly off my router, speeds faster than any wireless-N get-up I've tested.

Winner: This one's a draw. If I were building a new home, I'd have it wired - but I'd still have a wireless router for ease of use. If I had an existing home with, say, a Wireless-G router, I'd keep it and add a Powerline adapter for places where I needed dedicated, faster connections (like a home office, or a satellite box that downloads movies). The Powerline is one of the best consumer gadgets of the past five years.

DSL vs. CABLE HIGH-SPEED INTERNET

High-speed Internet has changed our lives. Long gone are the days of the logging into AOL and watching that blue login bar slowly fill up along the bottom of the screen. Today, we download high-definition movies and video games and music, sometimes in seconds. But all high-speed Internet is not created equal. If you're considering satellite-based Internet services, I'd rule them out - they're

DSL advantages: Unlike cable, which sometimes forces a neighborhood to share a "node," DSL is one wire to one home (though homes far away from the central server may not receive the same quality service as those closer). DSL is generally more readily available to customers in outlying areas than cable Internet. Some of the newer DSL services offer increased download speeds.

Cable Internet advantages: It's easier to connect. DSL users often need to add filters to their phone lines to prevent interference with regular phone use. Not a terribly big deal, but a small nuisance (especially when the filter doesn't work properly). Also, in real-life applications, cable tends to be a lot faster.

Knockout blow: It's all about speed. Cable high-speed connections can be fast, reliable and never require you to log in, as some DSL services require.

Winner: Go cable.

MAC vs. PC

The home computer market has long been dominated by Bill Gates, whose Windows software powered many of the systems we've known so well. But thanks to a user-friendly operating system, cool gadgets like the iPhone and a smart ad campaign ("Hi, I'm a Mac"), Steve Jobs' Apple brand of computers is making a big run. Last quarter, Apple accounted for nearly 10 percent of all U.S. computer sales, selling 1.64 million machines, a 29 percent increase over the same period in 2007. That put the company in third place in computer sales in the U.S. behind Dell and Hewlett-Packard, which both sell Windows-based machines. But which should you buy?

PC advantages: By now, most everyone knows how to click "Start" on a Windows machine. Using a PC is just familiar, and there are tons of programs and applications that work with Windows software. Since PC prices have plummeted, you can buy entry-level machines for as little as \$299. You can

also design a pretty powerful PC - complete with a Blu-ray Disc burner and dual processors - for under \$2,000. PCs are better for gaming, and there's more software available for them than for their Mac cousins.

Mac advantages: The Mac uses the Leopard operating system that is simply better, faster and easier to use (though there's an initial learning curve). A new version, Snow Leopard, is due later this year. The Mac starts up faster, runs programs faster and doesn't slow down as much as a PC when handling multiple tasks. Macs are generally more expensive than PCs, but don't tend to have as many problems with spyware and viruses. Macs will usually last longer. There's much more Mac software available than two years ago (you can even get Microsoft Office for the Mac) and if you really need to run Windows, you can install something called Boot Camp that allows you to run Windows on your Mac. In my tests, Vista ran faster and smoother for me on a Mac than on a fairly new PC.

Knockout blow: You can run Windows on a Mac. And Macs tend to outperform PCs. Once you get the hang of the Leopard operating system, you'll love it. We only wish there were more affordable Mac towers available. At least Apple offers refurbished models on its Web site at big discounts.

Winner: Mac, by a mile.

XBOX 360 vs. PS3

Everybody knows the Nintendo Wii is the hottest-selling video-game console. The tiny white unit is great for families, with lots of fun games. The wireless Wii-mote can mimic guitars, ski poles and even golf clubs pretty darned accurately. That brings a new dimension to video gaming, and it gets you off the couch. But for gamers into hard-core sports and fighting titles - for hard-core gamers of almost any kind, really - you're probably going to be choosing between the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3. Both systems can deliver stunning high-definition graphics, which the Wii cannot, and both are more powerful machines. Games look more realistic and come across as, um, more serious on those two machines. So which

one to choose?

Xbox's advantages: Nothing in console video gaming comes close to Xbox Live. You can download TV shows, movies, games, applications and much more via the online service. The audience is bigger than the competition's, so if you want a game of online "Madden" at 3 in the morning, there's always half a gazillion 5-star rated guys ready to take on you and your digital Steve Smith.

PS3 advantages: In most cases, the PlayStation games are better-looking when compared to their Xbox 360 counterparts. The PlayStation 3 has a built-in Internet browser, and the PlayStation online experience is getting better. The PS3 controller (thankfully available with the rumble feature once again) is also easier to use and fits better in the hand than the Xbox's.

Knockout blow: The PlayStation 3 comes bundled with a Blu-ray high-definition disc player. Blu-Ray's picture quality is so amazing, you might not want to go to the movie theater again. Given that some Blu-ray players cost more than the PS3 itself, you're basically getting two gadgets for the price of one. And there's even a new 160-gigabyte version of the PS3 to help store your downloads.

Winner: PlayStation 3, by a Blu-ray Disc.

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