

DTV Transition Preparation

LOOKING AT YOUR CABLE OPTIONS AS THE END OF ANALOG TV DRAWS NEAR

We all know what "DTV Transition" means. Duh. We all know that February 17, 2009 is the cutoff date. Also, duh. We all know that it means goodbye analog, hello digital, right? And it also means no more SDTV, only HDTV, right? Hmm...maybe not.

Here's a pop quiz for you: how is the cable service provider in your area handling the DTV cut-over? Our area provider has been running ads to reassure the customer that the DTV transition is nothing to be worried about. They point out that while over-the-air consumers will need to go out and purchase additional hardware (digital converter box), their customers need not be concerned. But let me tell you, speaking on behalf of a company that works with the cable provider everyday, their customers should always be concerned.

CABLE OPTION 1

There are a couple of different ways the cable service providers could handle this. The first is to modulate the signals over the current CATV spectrum, much like they do today. Broadcasts that originate in HD would have to be "down-rez'd" and modulated as a traditional 480i broadcast signal. They would, of course, have the beloved black bars across the top and bottom. Other broadcasts that are digital but not HD (you did know that was allowable, right?) would simply be converted to analog 480i. If they were shot in 4:3, they would stay that way.

CABLE OPTION 2

The second way that the cable providers could han-



All U.S. households are eligible to request up to two coupons to be used toward the purchase of up to two digital-to-analog converter boxes.

dle the situation would be through the use of a digital set-top box (STB). At this point, STBs are being handed out even to folks that just want the digital package so they can watch the Hallmark Channel. These lower-end STBs don't even support HD and are typically just hooked up to Channel 3 on the customer's TV. It would be very easy for the cable companies to keep their programming in the digital domain and require those that have legacy TVs to use these boxes hooked to their antenna inputs. Since there is a rental fee associated with the box, which plan do you think the cable company will undertake?

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING?

Well, our company had the same suspicions that you do, and we began the tedious process of working through the bureaucratic labyrinth that is the cable company. Much to our surprise, when we fi-

nally tracked down the appropriate person within the company, she confirmed that they will be re-transmitting HD channels in their traditional analog slots.

So, is this all much ado about nothing? Will life for your cable customers (and let's face it, that's the majority of your customer base) be totally unchanged, whether they have a high-def DVR hooked to a projector or a direct hookup from the wall to their kitchen TV? Definitely...maybe. From this viewpoint, I can't say whether all cable companies will handle it the same way our provider will. I also can't say whether they will always handle it this way or if they might require STBs at some point in the future.

And when February 17, 2009 does come, how many of your customers will call you to complain that their older TVs have gone bad and now have

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black bars across the top and the bottom? Or at least the lower channels have gone bad—CNN and Nick at Nite are still fine. Wait...they should have letterboxing too, right?

No, that's your last DTV trivia test for this article. Only broadcast (as in over-the-air) TV signals have to convert to HD. Channels that are strictly for cable/satellite can stay standard def for as long as they like. And they will, at least until there is a critical mass of HDTVs out there. But that's your job.

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