



The Scoop on the Dish

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

We may not need hundreds of television channels, but apparently lots of us want them.

Right now, the hot thing in the delivery of television programming is Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) services. DBS service providers offer viewers as many as 200 channels via pint-sized satellite dishes.

The picture is digital quality and the sound is CD quality, which attracts the TV purists. The small dish systems also strike a chord in frugal viewers who live where cable companies charge high rates for mediocre service.

ADVERTISING



“The primary reason we wanted a satellite dish at our beach home was because we come here to relax and enjoy the home and the entertainment center is a tremendous source of pleasure,” says Jim Simpson of Dana Point. “One of the great things I love about the satellite dish is the music channels. They’re varied and uninterrupted. I find them soothing. Even my dog finds the music channels very soothing.

“Also there’s a tremendous range of movie channels. To really understand an entertainment center, you have to experience it.”

With scores of channels available, service providers offer a seemingly infinite number of packages. The big dog of the DBS systems is DirecTV, a subsidiary of GM Hughes Electronics Corp.

Its programming includes the most popular cable channels such as CNN, ESPN, C-SPAN, the Weather Channel, TBS, TNN, A&E, the Disney Channel, TNT, the Learning Channel, CNBC, E! and the Discovery Channel. There are also first-run pay-per-view movies, extensive sports offerings (including live pay-per-view events) and specialty programs. Twenty-nine channels of stereo music without commercials are also available.

“The people who buy the big dishes are looking for sports, the wild feeds . . . or international programming,” says Don Ducharme, general manager of Multi-Television Services in Anaheim who installed the Simpsons’ system.

There’s even something for computer fans. Hughes is introducing Internet access via DirecTV. Transmission from the satellite will take place at 400 kilobits per second (Kbps), more than 10 times faster than the 28.8 kilobits per second that is the current standard for modems in home computers.

How do the new satellite setups differ from those 10-foot-wide dishes that seem to consume entire backyards? In the past, large dishes were necessary to pick up weak signals emanating from older, less powerful satellites. But today small dishes, 18 to 39 inches in diameter, deliver big time.

DirecTV was the first true DBS system to go into nationwide operation, closely followed by the United States Broadcasting Co. (USSB). These systems are built around three high-powered Hughes satellites.

With the DirecTV/USSB approach, users buy a DBS system--a small satellite dish, a receiver and a remote control--for \$400 to \$1,500, then pay for programming (about \$15 to \$45 a month).

Primestar, a DBS-like system, leases the dish, the receiver and the remote to the consumer as part of the programming package (about \$45 a month). Although it offers fewer channels, about 43% of direct-to-home customers prefer the cost of leasing over buying and paying for programming.

The newest DBS system is the EchoStar DISH Network (“DISH” stands for Digital Sky Highway). The system uses an 18-inch dish, but its receiver isn’t compatible with the DirecTV receiver. The company expects to launch another satellite later, which will boost the DISH Network’s capacity to 200 channels.

In some areas, users pay for basic cable service to receive local channels or purchase an antenna that will pull in the local stations. “That’s one of the big snags, there’s no local broadcasting,” says John Roberts, manager of Precision Audio in Brea. “The other complaint is, they have to buy a slave receiver for each additional television.”

A splitter can send the programming to other TVs or VCRs in your home, but all will be tuned to the same channel. To separate channels, you’ll need a deluxe system, which has two coaxial connections and costs about \$200 more than a basic system, and a second receiver (about \$500).

DirecTV and USSB insist on a telephone connection for each receiver in the household, so that the customer can access pay-per-view channels and the systems’ other interactive features.

There are a number of companies authorized to manufacture and distribute DSS units, which means price and feature competition are becoming fierce. RCA (owned by Thomson Consumer Electronics) and Sony were the first manufacturers of the DSS systems. Toshiba, Matsushita (Panasonic), Uniden, Sanyo, Samsung and Daewoo will also be in the market by the end of this year.

The DSS equipment is available from such dealers as Sears Brand Central, Circuit City, Best Buy, Wal-Mart, Costco and Sam’s Clubs, not to mention scores of small electronics specialty firms.

Consumers were quick to speak with their wallets when DBS was launched nationally in the summer of 1994. By the end of 1994, 600,000 dishes had been sold, a rate of growth three times faster than the VCR when it was introduced in 1977.

By mid-June, about 3 million DBS and quasi-DBS systems were installed, according to estimates by DBS Digest, an online newsletter (<https://www.dbsdish.com>) covering the DBS industry.

A further indication that the small satellite dishes will be around for a while is the growth of the small dish accessories. Toshiba offers two types of antenna for receiving local television programming, and the GlassLink connection system (\$99 to \$129) allows users to send signals through a window pane. This makes it so wire holes don't have to be drilled through walls.

Other companies are selling heaters for small dishes in cold climates, bubbles to protect the dishes without interfering with transmissions, and dishes that can be mounted on recreational vehicles and used while the RV is moving.

Professional installation of a basic system costs about \$200. Or, you can install it yourself (installation kits are available for about \$80 and include a video). They're not as complex as installing a 10-foot movable dish, and the DSS dish weighs only 10 to 12 pounds. It's set in a fixed position, unlike the large dishes. It can be installed on a roof or to the side of a house, though it can't be installed inside the house.

About a third of DirecTV owners do their own installations, says Bob Marsocci of DirecTV in Torrance.

Widespread acceptance of the small dishes is also smoothing the path for their use. A recent California law (SB 1376) prevents homeowners associations from interfering with the installation of the small dishes, says Ducharme. He expects this to help boost the sale of the dishes.

DBS users in Southern California need an unobstructed view of the southeast sky at an angle of about 40 to 45 degrees above the horizon. The dish remains fixed, aimed at the satellite sending the signal.

The satellites hover 22,300 miles over the equator, positioned to beam down compressed signals to small satellite dishes across the United States. Compressing the

signals allows service providers to cram more channels through each transponder on the satellite, which is the reason the services can offer so many channels.

But since each program compresses differently, the number of channels a service provider can offer will vary. This is why service providers sometimes seem vague about the number of channels they offer.

More service providers are entering the fray. The AlphaStar television service, a subsidiary of Tee-Comm Electronics, a Canadian satellite communications company, recently went into operation, carrying more than 90 channels. And at an FCC auction in January, MCI Telecommunications Corp. paid \$682.5 million for rights to the fourth and last DBS franchise capable of reaching the entire U.S. Its DBS system is not expected to go into operation until late 1997, at the soonest.

The growth of the small satellite dish market has created a new spark of competition in broadcasting. The consumer has more choices. But with prices dropping and programming increasing, there could be a satellite dish in your future.

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SATELLITE TV

Buzzwords

Be warned: Newcomers to satellite broadcasting can get caught in a tangle of terminology.

John Roberts, manager of Precision Audio in Brea, lumps the small-dish service providers as “home satellite” systems and uses more precise terminology as prospective customers become more familiar with the alternatives.

- * DBS (Direct Broadcast Satellite) refers to FCC-licensed systems with certain specifications regarding power and location of the satellites.
- * DTH (direct-to-home) is a broader term referring to satellite broadcasting in general.
- * DSS (Digital Satellite System) is a trademarked term referring to the hardware used to receive DirecTV and USSB programming.
- * Coaxial cable: Wiring the cable company runs into your home.
- * Decoder: the receiver.
- * PPV: Pay-per-view. A fee paid to view a program.

Programming

Some prospective buyers think that when they buy a small dish they don't have to pay for programming, says Don Ducharme, general manager of Multi-Television Services in Anaheim.

Selling programming is what makes the broadcasting world go round, and users pay for programming beyond what they can get with a plain old antenna.

DirecTV markets--one of three FCC-licensed DBS systems--offers programming packages that range from \$15 to \$45 a month, depending on the number of channels, up to 200. There are also 60 pay-per-view channels, with first-run movies costing \$3.

USSB offers packages from \$8 to \$35 for five HBO channels, three Showtime channels, three Cinemax channels, two Movie Channels, Nick at Nite's TV Land, the FLIX channel and all the channels in the basic package.

The DISH Network offers about 100 channels in five tiers of programming from \$20 to \$60 on EchoStar.

Primestar has more than 90 channels and plans to launch at least one new satellite with high-power capability, boosting the company's offering to more than 200 channels.

Primestar's fees--including the cost of leasing the equipment--range from \$30 to \$60 a month, with an average of \$40 to \$45.

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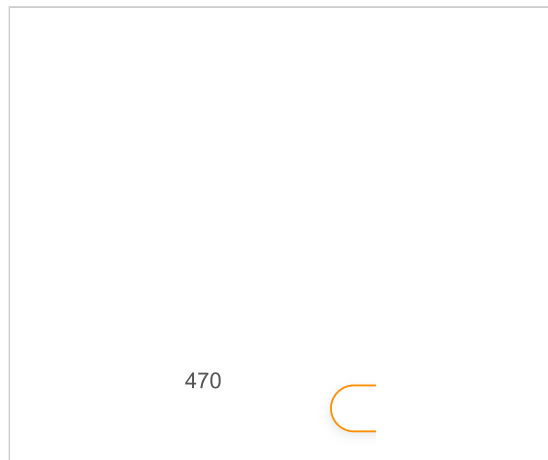
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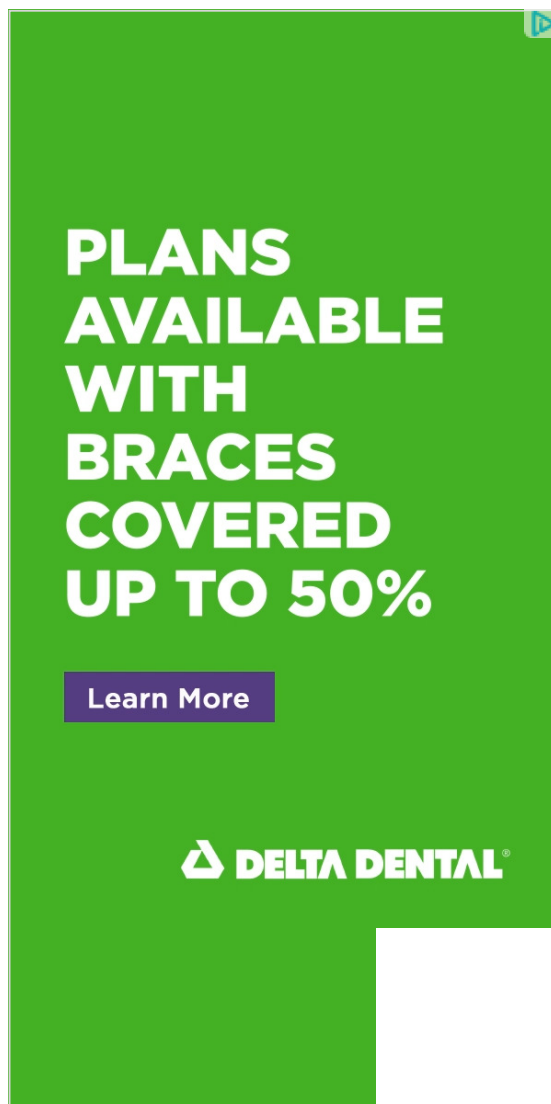
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