

Simple antenna can help kick costly cable TV habit

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Terrain, trees and buildings can affect signals and the type of antenna that works best at your location.
(Comstock Images)

As more people rethink ways to get television programming outside the traditional cable and satellite companies, the unsung TV antenna is becoming a fundamental component of their cord-cutting strategy.

That makes sense. Not only are broadcast TV signals free, but even a simple antenna can produce the best picture you've ever seen on your TV because the high-definition signals are less compressed than through cable or satellite.

And new flat, wall-mounted indoor antennas are a cinch to install and far less offensive aesthetically than the old rabbit ears — some can be affixed to a window behind drapes, for example. And with a one-time cost of about \$50 for about 50 channels — including almost all of the most popular 50 shows — the switch is a frugal-spender's delight.

HBO recently announced it would offer streaming online HBO service without a cable or satellite subscription, removing yet another reason people remain tethered to a paid-TV provider. ESPN, perhaps the largest hurdle to cutting cords, reportedly is looking into the same thing.

Antenna sales spiked several years ago with the switch to digital broadcast signals, but the antenna business has continued to flourish, said Ian Geise, senior vice president of Voxx Accessories, the largest seller of TV antennas under such names as Terk and RCA.

"It's really been this shift in mindset for people and (their) television entertainment," he said. And it's not all older consumers and cheapskates. Young adults who grew up on streaming content are becoming big customers of antennas as a way to complement their online video entertainment, he said.

A typical cord-cutting setup would include an antenna, supplemented with online programming that can be sent to your television via such streaming boxes as Apple TV and Roku and many of the newer "smart" television

sets that allow you to log in to online programming services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime Instant Video.

Of course, you would still need Internet service, potentially from the cable company, which results not in cord-cutting but cord-trimming. Even if you don't want to use over-the-air signals for your main TV, an antenna might work well for televisions in a bedroom or den, avoiding the monthly cost of extra cable boxes.

Interested in free TV? Here are questions and answers about antennas and getting some of your video entertainment over the air.

What equipment do I need? A TV and an antenna. If you have an old TV without a digital tuner, pre-2007, you might need a digital converter box.

What channels can I get? All the big broadcast channels, such as ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, CW and PBS. All but three of the top 50 shows were on broadcast networks during the last TV season and could be picked up by antenna, according to TV Guide's list for the 2013-14 TV season. You'll also get independent channels and subchannels of main networks that provide additional programming, such as old TV shows and foreign-language shows.

What programming won't I get? No "The Walking Dead" on AMC, "Monday Night Football" on ESPN or "Duck Dynasty" on A&E. No CNN or MSNBC, and no pay channels, such as HBO and Showtime.

How is the quality of over-the-air TV? Once you are receiving a strong signal, excellent. No snow or ghosting picture. "You have a cliff effect; you either have a signal or you don't have signal. If you're not receiving your signal properly, for the most part, you'll just get a blue screen," Geise said. Otherwise, the picture is likely to be noticeably better than cable or satellite. An exception might be broadcast subchannels, if there are a lot of them. They might be slightly lower quality than the main channel, but still high definition, said David Wilson, vice president of technology and standards at the Consumer Electronics Association.

How do I buy an antenna? Several websites can help you determine the reception at your address, the nearest TV transmitters and the channels you're likely to receive. Some help you choose an outdoor antenna model with color codes. Consumer Reports recommends antennaweb.org and the FCC's DTV Reception maps at tinyurl.com/fccmaps

What are the types of antennas? The basic choice is between indoor antennas, if you're roughly 25 miles or closer to transmitting towers, or outdoor and attic antennas if you are farther away. Outdoor antennas are better but indoor antennas are smaller and more discreet. Some flat, flexible, magazine-size plates can be mounted behind a TV, for example, or even painted the same color as the wall. Some newer outdoor antennas are smaller than traditional models and can be mounted to the side of a house, similar to a satellite dish, Geise said. Besides Terk and RCA, Mohu brand indoor antennas get good reviews. There's no such thing as an HD or digital antenna, which are marketing terms.

Is installation difficult? For indoor antennas, you attach it to your TV with the familiar coaxial cable and perform a channel scan to see what stations you get. See your TV's manual for instructions on performing a scan. Moving the antenna around the room might change which channels you receive. Mounting an outdoor antenna will depend on how handy you are and whether you are comfortable working at heights. Hiring an installer is an option.

Which is best? Terrain, trees and buildings can all impact signals and the type of antenna that works best at your location, so you might have to try a few. There is no "best." "There are so many factors that can come into play to get the best signal you can," Geise said. So, buy from a retailer that offers no-hassle returns. Consumer Reports says that for indoor antennas the wood or metal in your home's walls might interfere with and degrade

digital signals. It found the best placement is usually near a window facing the direction of your local TV transmitters. But again, your best strategy is trial and error.

Do features matter? Antennas that are amplified and omnidirectional sound like they're better, but they are not necessarily. A nonamplified, directional antenna might work best.

How much do they cost? Consumer Reports found little correlation between price and performance. The antenna that was generally able to pull in the most stations during its test was a \$32 model from RCA.

Can I feed several TVs with one antenna? Yes. You can use a splitter for the cable, possibly adding amplifiers for longer runs, as you would with cable and satellite TV.

Is there a downside? Potentially. Besides the inability to get nonbroadcast channels, recording shows and movies can be expensive or a hassle. You can record broadcast TV on DVRs, but some, like Tivo, have monthly service costs, mitigating your cord-cutting savings. Channel Master is another brand that is more expensive but has a DVR without a subscription. Tablo and Simple.tv are others. The biggest downside is that some people just won't be able to get a good enough signal to make an antenna work in their locations.

Just try it? If you are close enough to TV towers to use an indoor antenna, consider trying one. They are relatively inexpensive and low hassle to set up. If it doesn't work, it's no big deal. Just return it to get your money back.

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