

Compatibility of Cable TV and Digital TV Receivers – “Plug-and-Play”

New Rules Make DTV Transition Easier

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has adopted rules that will help smooth the transition to digital television (DTV) for millions of Americans. The FCC’s new “plug-and-play” rules will ensure that most cable systems are compatible with DTV receivers and related consumer electronics equipment. This is crucial toward building products and developing services to help spur the digital transition.

Background

Congress has determined that current broadcast television service must eventually convert completely to digital operation. Cable television and other video media are also transitioning to digital operation. Because DTV is delivered digitally, it allows for the delivery of a signal virtually free of interference. DTV broadcasters will be able to offer television with movie-quality pictures and Dolby digital surround sound, along with a variety of other enhancements. DTV technology is more efficient than analog technology and will allow the same number of stations to broadcast using less spectrum.

The FCC’s plug-and-play rules are important to the digital transition because they will facilitate the direct connection of digital navigation devices or customer premises equipment, such as television receivers, set-top boxes, and digital recorders that are purchased from retail outlets to cable television systems.

Plug-and-Play Digital Television

A “plug-and-play” digital television is a television that you can plug directly into your cable system and receive analog and most digital cable services without the need for a set-top box. More and more cable services are being provided in digital format, and broadcast stations are in the midst of the transition from analog to an all-digital service. Currently, plug-and-play is available for most analog services over cable, but not for digital.

Benefits of Plug-and-Play

- Many consumers like the convenience (and cost savings) of receiving cable programming without the need of a set-top box. If nothing else, it’s one less remote control to keep track of!
- You will be able to take your plug-and-play set virtually anywhere in the country and know it will work on cable systems offering digital services.



- Plug-and-play will allow you to fully utilize the features and functions provided by the television set that often are disabled when connected to a cable set-top box.

Will Digital Plug-and-Play Work Like Analog?

Digital plug-and-play will not work quite like analog. For digital plug-and-play, you'll probably need to get a security card (also known as a "CableCARD™") from your local cable operator. The security card will permit you to watch scrambled programming and premium services, to which you're subscribed.

Will I Need A Set-Top Box If I Have a Plug-and-Play Set?

The first generation of plug-and-play sets will be able to receive one-way programming only, including analog basic, digital basic, and digital premium cable programming. If you want to receive certain advanced digital cable services like video-on-demand, the cable operator-enhanced program guide, or interactive data-enhanced television service, using a first generation set, you will need to use a set-top box. You may also need a set-top box to receive other cable operator-provided services, such as a personal video recorder.

Negotiations are underway between the cable and consumer electronics industries to establish standards that would permit plug-and-play sets to provide advanced two-way services as well.

Availability of Plug-and-Play Sets

Plug-and-play sets built pursuant to the new standards may be available as early as the second half of 2004. To know if you are buying a plug-and-play set, ask your retailer if the set is "digital cable ready." Manufacturers that use that label must meet certain technical standards and complete a testing and verification process.

Watching High-Definition Programming On a Plug-and-Play Set

Plug-and-play will permit you to watch digital programming, but not all sets will display full high-definition quality. To be sure, check with your retailer on whether the set displays full high-definition quality or a lower resolution. You can also ask your local cable provider if they offer HDTV programming.

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