

## **Signal converter boxes are pretty easy to set up**

### **July 30, 2008 Ed Baig USA Today**

Most of the U.S. television audience won't have to do a thing to prepare for the coming demise of analog TV. With few exceptions, TV stations will stop broadcasting in analog on Feb. 17. If you subscribe to cable, satellite or some other pay-TV service, you'll continue to receive programming.

But if you're among the many folks who rely on rabbit ears or a rooftop antenna for reception, you'll have to act to avoid disruption.

Many people must buy a digital-to-analog converter box, such as the two small \$60 boxes I've been testing on a Toshiba TV in my kitchen: Magnavox's TB100MW9 and Zenith's DTT901. The boxes are simple enough to set up, though I prefer the Zenith's remote control and on-screen programming guide.

As the name suggests, converter boxes convert digital broadcasts back into an analog signal that your old TV can recognize.

The analog Toshiba is probably the most watched set in my house, even though it has the smallest screen. Normally, the Toshiba receives cable TV, but I disconnected it for my tests with the converter boxes.

I ran a connection cable from each box to the TV. I ran another cable to the \$60 RCA ANT1500 flat antenna I used in lieu of rabbit ears to each converter box. Once plugged in, the boxes can search for the stations broadcasting digitally in your area.

While neither the Zenith nor the Magnavox is terribly large, these nondescript black boxes do add clutter to an already cramped countertop.

The Zenith has a slimmer and simpler remote control, with a dedicated button leading to a signal-strength indicator. You have to dig into the set-up menu to gauge signal strength on the Magnavox.

The Zenith also has an "Analog Pass-Through" feature the Magnavox lacks. This lets you watch analog broadcasts right up to the February switch-off and will continue to take in "low-power" stations (from religious organizations, local governments, small businesses, etc.) still permitted to broadcast in analog. The antenna signal flows through the box to the TV even when the box is turned off. Alas, analog reception was dreadful.

Wondering if you even need one of these boxes? Here are some common questions:

**•Should I become a cable or satellite TV subscriber instead of buying a box?** It's another option and a good one. Or you can purchase a brand new TV with a tuner

capable of pulling in digital broadcasts. It will also let you continue to watch programs via an over-the-air antenna.

•**What if I have analog cable instead of digital?** You'll still be able to watch TV. Cable operators are converting digital signals to an analog format that will let you watch without a set-top box, says Brian Dietz of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, a trade group. But in some cases, your cable company may require you to get a box.

•**Isn't Uncle Sam subsidizing the cost of converter boxes?** Yes, through the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). Each U.S. household can request up to two coupons, worth \$40 a pop, good toward the purchase of an approved converter box. You can request a coupon via a 24-hour hotline (888-DTV-2009), apply online at [www.DTV2009.gov](http://www.DTV2009.gov), or visit the site for other options. Some retailers are also carrying applications.

NTIA says it takes a week or two to get a requested coupon; you'll have three months to redeem them. Coupons come with a list of nearby retailers selling converter boxes.

•**What can you watch?** Far fewer digital TV channels were available in my over-the-air tests than through cable. Still, digital technology allows broadcasters to "multicast" or actually create extra channels in a market to deliver additional programming. I was able to receive three local digital NBC feeds, including a weather channel and one showing the Olympic trials. There are also extra PBS channels.

•**How is reception?** There was noticeable improvement in picture quality with digital programs, compared with the analog cable fare I usually watch on the Toshiba. There was no fuzzy interference. The nature of digital means you'll either get a picture, and a very fine one at that, or get no picture at all. Of course, you're still limited by the picture capabilities of the TV itself. And just because you're watching digital TV doesn't mean you're watching high definition. You'll need an HDTV set for that.

Moreover, I did experience some hiccups watching New York-area CBS and Fox stations. The picture locked up or froze at times. Reception depends on the power of the broadcast and the location of the antenna. Experiment by moving the antenna and receiver around if possible. But I'd recommend playing around with your existing antenna before springing for an expensive new one.

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## **DON'T WAIT TO BUY TV SIGNAL CONVERTER BOX**

The digital-to-analog converter boxes some people will need to continue watching older TVs could be in short supply by midnight Feb. 17. That's when most TV broadcasters

are required to stop broadcasting in conventional analog, the TV transmission method since the days of Howdy Doody.

Manufacturers and retailers don't make large margins on the boxes and don't want to be stuck with excess inventory on Feb. 18, says independent tech analyst Rob Enderle.

"I wouldn't wait until the last minute," he says.

Digital Tech Consulting's Myra Moore says the boxes are already tough to come by in some stores, an issue for people who have an expiring \$40-off government coupon. They expire three months after they're issued.

A recent Best Buy survey found that while 88% of American consumers are aware of the digital broadcast transition, 54% do not know why it is happening, and many are still confused about what they need to do to get ready.

The switch replaces older TV technology with a newer, better one, and frees spectrum for new wireless services and public safety efforts.

It mainly affects the 10.5 million households Nielsen says rely exclusively on an over-the-air antenna for reception. And 23.5 million household have at least one TV that relies on an over-the-air antenna. Many owners of older TVs not hooked to cable or satellite will buy a converter box to get a signal after the cut-off. Consumers have bought 6.6 million so far using the government coupons.

As of last week, about 46% of the issued coupons that would have expired in mid-July or before have been redeemed.