The Mossberg Solution

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From PC to TV -- via Apple

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The race to connect your TV to your computer and the Internet is about to kick into high gear this week when Apple Inc., the company many believe is best positioned to pull off this feat, introduces a slender, wireless set-top box called Apple TV.

This silvery little $299 gadget is designed to play and display on a widescreen family-room TV set all the music, video and photos stored on up to six computers around the house -- even if they are far from the TV, and even if they are all Windows PCs rather than Apple's own Macintosh models. It can also pull a very limited amount of music and video directly off the Internet onto the TV.

Apple

The $299 Apple TV device connects wirelessly to home computers and then with a cable to your widescreen TV.

Apple TV is tiny, just about eight inches square and an inch high, far smaller than a typical DVD player or cable or satellite box, even though it packs in a 40-gigabyte hard disk, an Intel processor and a modified version of the Mac operating system. And it has a carefully limited set of functions.

Yet, in our tests, it worked great, and we can easily recommend it for people who are yearning for a simple way to show on their big TVs all that stuff trapped on their computers. We tried it with various combinations of Windows and Mac computers, with movies, photos, TV shows, video clips and music. And we didn't even use the fastest wireless network it can handle. It performed flawlessly. However, it won't work with older TVs unless they can display widescreen-formatted content and accept some newer types of cables.

Like the iPod before it, Apple TV isn't the first gadget in its category. Several other companies have made set-top boxes or even TV sets and game consoles that could link the TV to the digital content that people have on their computers. But none has found a mass audience for this functionality, mainly because they tend to be hard to set up and confusing to use. Apple is hoping that, just as the iPod trumped earlier, but geekier, rivals, Apple TV can do the same by making a complex task really simple.

Part of the secret of Apple TV is that, like most of Apple's products, it doesn't try to do everything and thus become a mess of complexity. It can't receive or record cable or satellite TV, so it isn't meant as a replacement for your cable or satellite box, or for a digital video recorder like a TiVo. It can't play DVDs, so it doesn't replace your DVD player. Its sole function is to bring to the TV digital content stored on your computer or drawn from the Internet. Like a DVD player, it uses its own separate input on your TV set, and you have to change inputs using your TV remote to use it.

Apple TV isn't for that small slice of techies who buy a full-blown computer and plug it directly into a TV, or for gamers who prefer to do it all through a game console. And it's not for people who are content to watch downloaded TV shows and movies directly on a computer screen. Instead, it's for the much larger group of people who want to keep their home computers where they are and yet enjoy their downloaded media on their widescreen TVs.

Apple TV's most formidable competitor is the Xbox 360 game console from Microsoft, which, in addition to playing games, can also play back content from Windows computers on a TV. And Xbox 360 can do something Apple TV can't do, at least not yet, which is to directly purchase and download movies and TV shows from the Internet. But the comparable Xbox costs 50% more than Apple TV, is much larger and stores only half as much material.

We've been testing Apple TV for the past 10 days or so, and our verdict is that it's a beautifully designed, easy-to-use product that should be very attractive to people with widescreen TV sets and lots of music, videos, and photos stored on computers. It has some notable limitations, but we really liked it. It is classic Apple: simple and elegant.

In our tests, Apple TV performed perfectly in Walt's house over a standard Wi-Fi wireless network with a Pioneer plasma TV and six different computers -- three Windows machines from Hewlett-Packard and Dell, and three Apple Macs. Setup was a breeze, the user interface was clean and handsome, and video and audio quality were quite good for anyone but picky audiophiles and videophiles. We never suffered any stuttering, buffering or hesitation while playing audio and video from distant computers.

Apple

The Apple TV menu points to content stored on your home computers.

Unlike any of its rivals, Apple TV can play the copy-protected music, TV shows and movies purchased from Apple's iTunes online store, the most popular legal downloading service by far. (However, it cannot play copy-protected music in Microsoft's formats, even from Windows computers.) It worked great with laptops and desktops alike, with Windows XP and the new Windows Vista operating system, and with newer Macs powered by Intel processors and an older Mac powered by an IBM-built G5 processor.

Apple TV's most important limitation is that it can't stream much video or audio directly from the Internet -- yet. The capability to go directly to the Internet, bypassing the computers in your home, is built in, but is initially being used only to fetch feature film trailers and short preview clips of popular songs, TV shows and movies sold on the iTunes store. Apple TV also won't allow you to buy media directly from the iTunes store. You must first download content from the Internet or iTunes on a computer, and then Apple TV will grab it from the computer and play it on the TV.

In its usual secretive fashion, Apple refuses to say if or when this direct-to-the-Internet capability will be expanded. But we fully expect Apple to add the capability to stream or download a variety of content directly from the Internet, and that this new capability will be available on current Apple TV boxes through software updates.

In our tests, Apple TV is a pleasure to use. Setup was stunningly simple. We just plugged the unit in and hooked it up to the TV with a single cable (not included). The unit found and connected with Walt's Wi-Fi network almost instantly. To link to each computer, we just typed into iTunes on that computer a five-digit code number the Apple TV put up on the TV screen. This needs to be done only once.

You can select one computer to automatically synchronize with the Apple TV. Any song, TV episode, movie or photo you download or otherwise add to that one computer is automatically replicated on the Apple TV's internal hard disk for playback on your TV. We tested this synchronization function with both a Mac laptop and a Windows Vista desktop, and it worked perfectly on both.

For instance, we imported 376 photos Katie had taken on a recent trip to France to a Mac laptop that was synchronized with the Apple TV. In short order, all of the photos were on the Apple TV and we watched them on the big plasma screen.

We also bought some TV shows, movies and songs from iTunes on our synchronized laptop, and they were automatically transferred to Apple TV, where we could watch them. It can, however, take hours to synchronize large files like movies over a slow wireless network.

In addition to your single synchronized computer, you can designate up to five other computers as sources for your Apple TV. From these machines, you "stream" the content over your wireless or wired network, instead of actually transferring them, but the music and video shows up on the TV just as if it had been synchronized to the Apple TV's own hard disk.

All of these functions are controlled through iTunes on your Windows and Mac computers, just as you would control an iPod through iTunes. (The latest version of iTunes is required.)

In our tests, streaming worked just as well as playing content from the Apple TV's own hard disk. Even though Walt's Wi-Fi network is of the older "G" variety, and the Apple TV can handle newer, faster "N" variety networks, every single movie, TV show and song streamed without interruption from both Windows and Mac computers. That even included older or slower computers. This was an impressive feat.

The only downside of streaming as compared to syncing is that you can't stream photos. These can appear only through synchronization. Apple plans to enable photo streaming later.

On the TV screen, Apple TV presents a simple, handsome list of content for each computer you choose to view. Media is divided into Movies, TV Shows, Music, Podcasts and Photos. You can change among your various computers using a menu called Sources.

There are some drawbacks to Apple TV. It won't work with most older TV sets, the square kind that aren't capable of handling widescreen programming. And it works only with TVs that have the newer types of connectors, such as "component" jacks, and the new HDMI cables being used on most high-definition TVs. It works best with high-definition TVs, and it puts out video in high-definition resolutions. But it will also work with "enhanced definition" widescreen sets.

Also, the tiny, simple Apple remote control can't control the volume on either Apple TV or your TV set or audio receiver, so you have to keep reaching for the TV or audio receiver remote. And you can't plug in an extra hard disk to add storage capacity, even though there's a USB port on the back and the built-in 40-gigabyte drive is too small to hold many TV shows or movies.

But, all in all, Apple TV is a very well-designed product that easily brings the computer and the TV together.

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