

ELECTRONIC HOUSE

SPECIAL REPORT SMART TVs ESSENTIAL FEATURES

Boost Your TV's IQ

Smart TVs offer a wealth of new entertainment options. **By Grant Clauser**



Vizio XVT3D

FOR DECADES the television has been known as the idiot box, and in many ways it has been exactly that. Aside from a few video processing tricks and some snazzy onscreen menus, TVs have done little more than accept your cable or DVD video signal and then display the picture. All of the cool things you could do with your TV—play video games, order video-on-demand movies, browse advanced onscreen menus—were done by boxes you plugged into the TV. The TV itself was really basic in its talents.

Then along came the Internet. As the computer started to become a more important device for accessing content, TV manufacturers began to look for ways to get people away from their laptops and back in front of their TVs. The answer: streaming video content from the Internet to the screen of the TV.

It's been a few years since TV makers solved this mystery, and the products have since evolved a great deal. What we call smart TVs, or connected TVs, feature the ability to play a variety of online content and also utilize apps, much like smartphones, to personalize the TV in ways not possible before. Rather than just turn on your TV to see what's on the cable DVR, with a smart TV

Shopping for a Smart TV

6 essential features and the popular must-have apps.

The Features

Picture Quality. First, is it a good TV? You may get the TV with the best apps or widgets and the coolest remote, but if the picture looks terrible, you'll still be unhappy.

Services. What services do you want? It doesn't pay to get the TV with the most services if it doesn't include any of the ones you want. Do you need Skype? Do you need Twitter or *Angry Birds*, or will Netflix and Pandora cover all of your video and listening needs?

Size. Many of the features on smart TVs, especially the social media features, require a lot of text reading. If your sofa is going to be far from the TV, make sure your TV is big enough

to allow you to easily read what's on the screen.

Connection. How will you connect? If your Internet router is near your TV then you can use a wired Ethernet connection. But if your router is in another part of the house, you'll need Wi-Fi. Some TVs come with Wi-Fi capability built in; others will require a USB adaptor, usually at an additional cost.

Video processing. If you want a smart TV for streaming video, be sure the TV can make low-quality streaming video look good. Better TVs include better video processing technologies to analyze and improve Internet video.

Audio return. Make sure the TV has an audio return channel either built into the HDMI

port via HDMI v1.4 or as an additional digital optical output. All smart TVs include some kind of music streaming service, and you won't want to use the junky speakers built into your TV to listen to your customized music channels. An audio return channel allows you to play your streaming music through your surround-sound receiver.

The Apps

Netflix. This service is available on every smart TV platform, and for good reason. Despite all the bad press the service has received recently for its price hike and (redacted) name revision, it's still the best deal online for streaming movies and TV shows.

you can access your favorite streaming video services, listen to Internet music stations, play downloaded games or share the events of your day on social media apps.

A smart TV is more than just a TV with a built-in web browser, though. It's more like a smartphone, because its Internet coolness mostly comes from apps or widgets—applications for media, games or communications.

Can you dump cable if you have a smart TV? It depends on your viewing habits. A good antenna can get you the major (and often many minor) networks for free, so if you can live with that and use smart TV features like Netflix, Hulu Plus or Vudu for everything else, then sure, you can dump that costly cable package. The kicker is sports, as there's no effective way to ensure you won't miss the important games without a pay TV service piped into your living room.



Toshiba TL515U

Pandora. Second to Netflix is Pandora, the most popular streaming music site. One thing users like most about Pandora is how easy it is to create custom stations tailored to their listening tastes. The other thing people like about it is that it's free.

Skype. A few years ago Skype started out as "the other" Internet phone service; now it's THE Internet phone service, so much so that Skype has become a verb as in, "you can Skype me at this number." Making video calls on a big smart TV is a great way to keep in touch with family and friends far away.

Angry Birds. Who would have guessed that a game simpler than Hangman would catch on? As far as I can tell, the point is to toss birds at pigs in order to break down their forts and steal back the pilfered eggs. Whatever. It's still a hot game and a must on your smart TV if there are any kids in the house.

Facebook. There's no escaping your friends, and sort-of friends, with Facebook built into your TV. The benefit of having it on your smart TV screen is posting videos and pictures on a big screen rather than having to squint into a cell phone.

Hulu Plus. This is one of the most important features if you want to quit cable altogether. This is the premium version of the online TV service. For \$8 a month you can watch all the TV and movies you want, including complete seasons and complete episodes of programs not available on the free service, and much of it is in high definition.

8 Reasons to Buy a Smart TV

1. MUSIC Radios are so old-school. Today a much greater variety, along with the option to create your own personalized channels, is available via online services. There are several online music services found on smart TVs. Some, like Slacker and Pandora, are free to use, while others, like Rhapsody and Spotify, charge a monthly fee.

2. MOVIES AND TV For most folks, access to streaming movies and TV programs is the primary reason to invest in a smart TV. After all, it's a television, and that's what they're for. More than that, smart TVs, with applications like Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, and CinemaNow offer the best options for movie night since the decline of disc rental stores like Blockbuster.

3. GAMES With the cost of traditional console-based video games averaging \$50 a pop, gaming can be a very expensive hobby. App games on smart TVs, however, are often free or cheap (usually around \$5).

4. FITNESS Wii Fit isn't the only tech device that can get you off the couch and into your skinny jeans. Several connected TVs include fitness, health and exercise apps. Panasonic Vera Connect TVs, for example, include a number of wellness apps from Withings, BodyMedia and Icon Health & Fitness. The BodyMedia Fit app connects with a wireless armband monitor to track data during your workout.

5. VARIETY While many of the apps you'll find on smart TVs will be familiar to you (Netflix, Pandora, Facebook), the variety of options on some TVs is almost overwhelming. With news, games, wellness, art, sports, you now have more media choices via your smart TV than through your cable service provider.

6. WEATHER Most connected TVs feature weather apps that allow you to input your city or zip code for up-to-date weather information. That's a lot quicker than waiting for the evening news to bring you the forecast.

7. SOCIAL Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter may be time wasters in the office, but at home they're a major factor in how we connect with friends and family. Social media on a big-screen TV becomes even more social, especially when you want to share posted photos or videos.

8. COMMUNICATIONS TVs from Sony, Samsung and Panasonic all facilitate Skype video calls via a broadband connection. All you need is a USB webcam and a Skype account, and you're good to go.

Smart TV Options

Key products to consider for your family entertainment.

Samsung UN60D8000YF LED TV ▶

The 8000 series includes Samsung's top-of-the-line LED 3D TVs. This 60-inch model is an edge-let LED with a super-thin profile, and it's loaded with features. First, it's an active-shutter style 3D TV with Clear Motion 960Hz processing and a dynamic contrast ratio of 25,000,000:1. The smart TV features a robust Smart Hub that includes a large app gallery and a search feature that will find your content across multiple applications. In addition to Yahoo Widgets and the most popular smart apps, the Samsung smart TV includes a full web browser. \$4,199, www.samsung.com



Mitsubishi WD-82740

Mitsubishi likes to do things large, and this 82-inch 3D TV is no exception. It employs Texas Instruments' DLP technology to project the big 1080p picture. It features a 120Hz subframe rate and six-color processing. For Wi-Fi, the set requires an optional adaptor, but Ethernet is built in. Its smart TV spread includes Vudu video-on-demand with 3D Vudu content, plus Facebook, Pandora, Flickr and more. \$4,199, www.mitsubishi-tv.com

Toshiba 55TL515U

Toshiba's 55-inch Natural 3D—also known as Passive 3D—features an ultra-slim design, 1080p CineSpeed Plus LED panels with local dimming and 240Hz ClearScan technology. The set's smart TV platform is made up of two tiers. First, there's Yahoo Widgets, which lets you add a wide variety

of news and information feeds for a customized experience. The second tier is Net TV, which offers a selection of typical content services including Netflix, Pandora, Flickr, CinemaNow, Skype, Blockbuster and Vudu. \$1,799, www.toshiba.com/tv

VIZIO XVT3D5545V

Vizio's 55-inch full-array LED LCD 3D HDTV uses 120 zones of local "smart dimming" to enhance contrast and 480Hz processing to smooth out motion. It delivers full 1080p 3D via active shutter glasses, though you'll have to pay extra for those. The smart remote includes a standard remote pad, plus a slide-out QWERTY keypad for convenient access to Internet features. Vizio calls its smart TV offerings VIA (Vizio Internet Apps), which include premium services such as

Hulu Plus, Netflix, Fandango, Vudu, Fantasy Football, Blockbuster, Rhapsody, Pandora, NBA Gametime, plus Yahoo Video and others. \$1,699, www.vizio.com

Sony XBR-55HX929

This 55-inch LED XBR series includes every video technology Sony could squeeze into it. The screen uses a Corning Gorilla Glass panel for a sturdy and light frameless design. The X-Reality Pro technology improves picture detail especially for low-resolution web videos. Sony smart TVs include the company's own Qriocity service, which offers online music and video, plus a large selection of other content providers including Slacker radio. Skype video calling and DLNA sharing is also included. \$2,899, www.sonymstyle.com

LG 55LW9800 ▶

This 55-inch TV is built around LG's Nano technology, which uses a microthin film to help disperse the LED light evenly across the screen. The TV is a passive 3D TV, which means the glasses are polarized and don't require batteries or charging. It's also the first passive 3D TV to receive THX certification. Built-in Wi-Fi makes getting to the smart TV features easy. From the attractive online landing page viewers can access Amazon, Mog, Hulu Plus, Skype options and more from the LG App Store, including a "3D Zone." There's even a gesture-based remote to control it all. \$3,799, www.lg.com



Sharp LC-70LE735U ▶

This 70-inch 3D LED LCD TV includes a unique feature to Sharp—Quattron technology—which adds a yellow subpixel to the standard red, blue and green pixels of other LCD TVs. Sharp says this expands the TV's color gamut for more accurate pictures. Wi-Fi on this set is built-in, which precludes the need for an Ethernet cable or wireless adapter. Smart TV offerings include the most popular services such as Facebook, Netflix, CinemaNow, Pandora and Vudu, but the company's most interesting feature is the Aquos Advantage Live online help service. With Aquos Advantage Live, customer service techs can access your TV to make diagnostic checks or help you set up the TV remotely, and it's free. \$4,799, www.sharpsusa.com



Panasonic TC-P55VT30 ▶

This 55-inch 3D plasma TV sports Panasonic's new Viera Connect platform. It's a major overhaul from last year's smart TV approach and includes a new marketplace for adding apps. Panasonic has developed relationships with major sports leagues and added apps for professional sports such as baseball, hockey, football and basketball. The list also includes many games, fitness apps and Skype for video calling. This model is also THX-certified for both 2D and 3D and does 2D to 3D conversion. \$2,499, www.panasonic.com

