

'Software guy' builds HDTV antennas out of frustration

Jerri Stroud
Of the Post-Dispatch

Richard Schneider says he bought seven or eight different high-definition television antennas in his quest to get crisp, clear pictures in his home theater over the last decade.

None worked very well, so he began tinkering. He learned which frequencies television stations in St. Louis were using for digital broadcasts and focused on developing an antenna that was optimized for those frequencies.

Schneider, 36, is a software guy, not an engineer, but, he said, "I knew enough to be dangerous."

He finally built an antenna that worked well, and he began selling a few to other home theater enthusiasts. Some dealers asked him to make antennas.

"They were all as frustrated as I was," Schneider said. He was selling antennas out of the trunk of his car on his lunch hour and after work.

In 2003, he decided to get 50 antennas made and put up a Web site, Antennas Direct. After two weeks, he had to take down the Web site because he was sold out and had antennas on back order.

"I realized it could be a business," Schneider said.

He found companies overseas that would make the antennas under contract for a reasonable price, and he worked with engineers to refine the design. He also quit his job with a St. Louis branch of a software company.

"We haven't really revolutionized the antenna," Schneider said. "We've just refined them into the frequencies where the digital signals are being broadcast."

Antennas Direct offers 13 different models, priced from \$39 to \$99. Customers can install them or hire a satellite TV company to handle that task. The antennas can be placed on a roof, in an attic or near a window. Schneider offers a lifetime warranty.

He said most of his sales have come by word of mouth - or Web - because he hasn't had a budget for a marketing campaign. He did pay Captiva Marketing to redo his Web site to optimize it for search engine marketing, a move that boosted sales significantly.

Schneider runs the business from an office over the garage of his Wildwood home, with a couple of employees to answer the phone and arrange shipments. He's sold antennas to about 60 dealers all over the United States and is working with a distributor in Toronto to start sales in Canada.

Schneider said he's sold about 18,000 antennas so far and currently is selling about 1,300 to 1,400 a month. He expects sales to pick up as the holidays approach. He does about half of his business during the fourth quarter.

Schneider said many customers are people who either don't want to pay for cable high-definition service or who have satellite service and want to combine it with off-air local signals. About a third are quitting cable and going to an antenna.

"Digital off-air video is not compressed, so it's the best signal there is," Schneider said.

But Mike Paxton, a senior analyst with In-Stat, a research firm in Scottsdale, Ariz., said there's little evidence that high-definition viewers are leaving cable for off-air reception. Fewer than a third of the 3.9 million households that receive high-definition signals are getting them off the air.

"I don't see any big shift. There's still going to be growth on the terrestrial side," Paxton said. Most people who get HDTV will receive it from the same source as they get other television, he said.

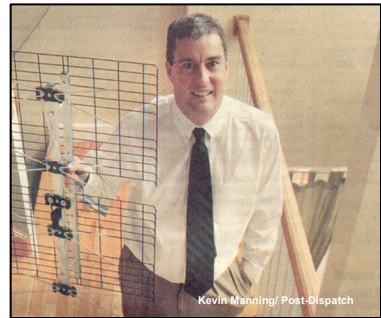
Satellite installers who've used the antennas are enthusiastic.

"I love the antennas," said John McMillian of Signal Seekers in Webster Groves. "I like the way they were constructed. They work very well."

Chad Musgrove of Expert Satellite in Thornton, Colo., said he's installed more than 20 of Schneider's antennas in the last year. "They're awesome," he said.

Schneider said he wants to add some outside salespeople to build his presence in stores. Retail accounts for 30 percent of his sales.

He's contemplating moving the business out of his home in about two months. So far, he's financed the business out of savings and cash generated by the business. But he might have to borrow



Richard Schneider holds an HDTV antennae he has developed.

money when Antennas Direct begins rolling out some new models this fall.

Schneider said he's focused on making the antennas work well rather than on making them eye-pleasing. But they are smaller than most antennas at about 18 inches by 24 inches.

"We've got the physics down," he said. "Now we're working on the aesthetics."

Antennas Direct

Headquarters: Wildwood

Products: 13 models of antennas for receiving off-air high-definition television, used either alone or with satellite or cable service. Antennas can be installed on the roof or in the attic of a house with a clear shot of broadcast towers. In the St. Louis area, most of the towers are in south St. Louis County.

Why they're needed: Satellite services don't transmit local stations in high-definition, and some cable companies don't retransmit all of the local stations' HD signals.

Cost: \$39 to \$99, not counting the cost of a high-definition tuner and an HD-ready television

Web site: www.antennasdirect.com

Phone: 1-877-825-5572 (toll free)