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Want HDTV without paying the cable bill? Get one of these

Bruce Mohl
Of the Boston Globe

Rooftop antennas are back in vogue.

Many homeowners are trading up to expensive television sets and hooking them up to old-fashioned antennas that can pull in the digital and high-definition signals of local broadcasters for free.

That's right, free. You only get the signals of local broadcast stations -- ABC, NBC, CBS, PBS, etc. -- but there's no monthly cable or satellite fees and no need for a set-top box. Even more amazing, the quality of the over-the-air high definition picture may be better than what the cable and satellite companies deliver.

"We are witnessing the renaissance of the old-fashioned TV antenna," said Arthur Gubeskys, chief technology officer of Convexicon Inc. of Long Island, N.Y., which has set up a website called HDTVantennalabs.com to help consumers find the best antenna for them.

Antenna manufacturers such as Antennas Direct of Eureka, Mo., say they are struggling to keep up with demand, in part because there are few companies making antennas today.

"It's kind of like the day after Prohibition," said Richard Schneider, the president of Antennas Direct. "People could drink, but there were no breweries around."

Kevin Turren, the owner of Grand Illusions in Stoughton, said he completed one antenna installation a month when he launched his business five years ago; now he handles five a month.

"It's becoming the solution to Comcast high prices," Turren said.

The shift to antennas is coming as broadcasters are nearing the end of a decadelong transition to digital transmission. Going digital allows them to transmit more channels in the same amount of spectrum with greater picture and sound quality.

It also frees spectrum for use by the nation's public safety agencies.

Most local broadcasters are now transmitting both digital and analog signals of their channels, but under federal regulations they will discontinue their analog transmissions two years from now. When that happens, the estimated 34 million households currently receiving an analog signal over the air will either have to buy set-top boxes that can convert the digital signal back to analog or upgrade to digital TVs.

But few people are aware of this looming deadline or what it means.

The National Association of Broadcasters says its polling data indicates 62 percent of US consumers know nothing about the coming digital TV transition and only 4 percent are aware the analog switchoff date is Feb. 17, 2009.

There's also a lot of misinformation about digital TV. Dan L. Smythe Jr. of Bedford, who bought a high definition set for Christmas, said many people told him the only way to receive digital and high definition signals was by subscribing to cable or satellite.

He hooked his new set up to the antenna in his attic and immediately picked up 20 local channels broadcasting in digital, seven of them in high definition.



Antennas Direct's Lacrosse HDTV Antenna

"We watched the Super Bowl in high definition, and we probably could have done it with rabbit ears," he said.

Antenna conditions are almost ideal now. Nearly all digital TVs come with tuners capable of receiving over-the-air signals and the chips inside the sets have undergone dramatic improvements. The antennas themselves are much more powerful and smaller than their predecessors.

Some can be hidden on the back of a picture frame. They cost anywhere from \$18 to \$160.

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Want HDTV without paying the cable bill? Get one of these (Cont.)

Originally, consumers shifted to cable TV to get a better signal, but now many homeowners are moving back to antennas because they believe they can get a better high-definition signal.

"The quality of the high-definition picture is better over the air than it is on cable and satellite because they have to compress their signals," said David Liroff, the longtime chief technology officer at WGBH (Ch. 2) who has just taken a posting with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The most likely antenna converts are people who don't want to pay \$500 to \$600 a year for cable or satellite service, or people who want to watch CNN, ESPN, and the Red Sox on NESN but don't want to pay the cable company \$5 to \$11 a month extra for high definition programming.

Schneider said 70 percent of the people buying his company's antennas subscribe to satellite or cable and buy the antenna as a supplement to watch their local channels in high definition.

Comcast charges \$5 a month extra for a high-definition set-top box. DirecTV charges an extra \$11 a month for high-definition service.

The research firm In-Stat reported in December that 60 percent of the 25 million US households with high-definition sets don't watch any shows in high definition.

The research indicated people bought the sets because they liked the way they look, the picture quality was better than their old set, and they weren't willing to pay extra fees to obtain high definition content.

With an antenna, they wouldn't have to pay those extra fees for local broadcast channels.

Shawn Feddeman, a spokeswoman for Comcast, said the cable giant guarantees its customers a high-quality interference-free picture, something an antenna cannot do.

She said the quality of an over-the-air signal depends on many factors, including how close the antenna is to the TV transmitter, interference from buildings, trees, hills, and power lines, and even the materials used in a roof or siding.

HDTVantennalabs.com offers a lot of information on reception issues. Users can plug in their address and see what stations are available in their area and what kind of antennas would obtain the best reception.

Most installers recommend rooftop antennas, but Liroff advises consumers to do their research and start small before buying expensive options.

"It's a matter of doing experiments and keeping the investment as low as possible," he said. Liroff, who lives in

Newton, near many TV transmitters, said he uses an inexpensive indoor antenna and "I get a glorious interference-free picture."