These TV Lovers Can Wait for HD  
By Sarah Lacy in Silicon Valley  
Edited by Jim Kerstetter

They set out to find a high-tech model for under $2,000 that's better than their current 36-inch CRT. They wound up keeping what they have

I know this sounds incredibly unsophisticated, but my husband and I like TV. A lot.

Don't get me wrong -- we're plenty smart. We read The New Yorker and go to art openings and indie film festivals and all that. But we like our Lost. We like our O.C. We even like our Survivor. And we love our sports. So it wasn't without some gravitas that we undertook the assignment of finding the coolest TV we could actually afford as a 30-something, childless San Francisco couple. We were given a week -- a reasonable time period for anyone except my husband, Geoff. When we moved to California five years ago we had to sleep on a fold-out couch for eight months until he could decide on a mattress to buy. Then he returned it.

ONE MOVER DOWN. TVs are no different. Four years ago, we had a tiny 17-inch set. People actually laughed when we invited them over to watch a game or a movie. Then it started whistling. In high-tech, post-bubble Silicon Valley it was downright embarrassing.

In our quest to replace it back then, we looked at new sets for almost a year of Sunday afternoons, scouring Best Buy (BBY) and Circuit City (CC) outlets throughout the Bay Area. It paid off. We bought a Toshiba sporting a 36-inch flat-screen cathode ray tube (CRT), not a flat-panel set. It's silver and very stylish, with a fantastic picture, and we got it $600 off due to overstock -- a $1,300 TV for about $700.

But it has two drawbacks: It's not widescreen, and it's massive. It weighs about 300 pounds. The last time we relocated, one of our movers threw out his back trying to navigate it down a cobblestone walkway. We had to halt the process for three hours so he could be taken to the hospital and a replacement could take over.

TIVO WINS. Funny how things don't change all that much. The dilemmas we faced in our BusinessWeek Online shopping adventure in mid-November weren't all that different than what we faced when we bought our monster TV four years ago.

To start with, our current set isn't built to work with high-definition broadcasts, although I'm not convinced that's a drawback. By all accounts, HD is still just a pain. With many sets, you have to buy converter boxes, which cost around $300 and then find out what your cable company is actually carrying in HD, pay more for it, and then maybe even buy a ye olde TV antenna to get certain network HD signals.

And so far, TiVo (TIVO) digital video recorders don't support HD, unless you get a special box from DirecTV. I have cable, and I'll take TiVo over HD any day.
STILL TOO PRICEY. Next you graduate to the plasma vs. liquid-crystal display debate, two flat-panel technologies that threaten to one day make our friend the CRT obsolete. Both create pixels that make up an image by passing some sort of current through different substances -- for plasma it's neon gas, for LCD it's a liquid crystal solution. The best models can showcase details in high definition better than anything on the market -- and look cool mounted on a wall.

Problem is not much HD is being broadcast yet. Sure, what is HD now includes big sports games or network dramas, but most of what Geoff and I watch is still only in standard definition. That's important because the best thing for viewing standard definition is still the venerable CRT -- a fact no salesperson wants to tell you.

Bottom line: After scouring Circuit City, Magnolia Audio Video, Good Guys, and Silicon Valley tech mainstay Fry's Electronics, we came up empty. We found no compelling reason to upgrade and navigate those HD pitfalls, unless it's a significantly better viewing experience and under $2,000. Nothing was. Prices of LCD and plasma flat panels were slashed from 30% and 50% off list even at the higher-end stores, but they still weren't under the $2,000 barrier for a size comparable to our current TV.

THE WRONG ZONE. That was even the case at the higher-end Magnolia in Colma -- a tiny suburb south of San Francisco. That's where we started. Once inside the swank store, we were steered into a room filled with big screens. Fifty-inch beauties showed our local football team, the 49ers, finding yet another way to lose. The play-by-play announcer's voice boomed from speakers somewhere in the ceiling. I heard a little girl exclaim, "Mommy, it's dark in here!"

It was all just a bit overwhelming. Many of the TVs were just too big. They would barely fit on our living room wall. And they would match our décor only if we lived on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. "We've just entered, 'The Cannot Afford Zone,'" Geoff whispered.

Truth be told, most of the TVs we looked at were in that zone. But we did learn several important things: Flat-panel TVs really are undeniably cool, plasma is way better than LCD, and something is going very right at Matsushita Electric Industrial (MC ), the company behind Panasonic.

NO DEBATE. The single best set we saw for the money was Panasonic's 42-inch plasma widescreen with enhanced-definition (which displays images at 852 by 480 pixels vs. HD's 1,280 by 720 pixels or higher). It used to be $3,800. The cheapest I found it was online at CircuitCity.com for $2,699 -- still above our price range, I know. And when you factor in having someone mount it on the wall -- as much as $700, it's way out.

But eventually, when prices fall, it'll be worth it to go plasma. Salespeople try to make this plasma vs. LCD debate complex, pointing out little plusses and minuses. Plasmas, for
instance, look good even when viewed from an angle, where LCDs look best straight-on -- an important factor since I like to peek at the TV from the kitchen.

But, really, it was simple to us. LCDs looked horrible, and plasmas looked great. My very visual, graphic-designer husband cringed when looking at LCD TVs, saying it was so harsh and pixilated it hurt his eyes. It was O.K. while the high-definition football game was on, but when the standard-definition commercials came on he shrieked, "Did you see that Simpsons commercial?"

NO MORE CHANGE. When we walked past the plasmas he sighed, "Now that's what TV is supposed to look like!" Then, put off by my scribbling down his quotes, he pretty much stopped exclaiming anything.

Quite often, electronics stores are playing DVDs on their display models, so you don't notice that kind of HD vs. standard-definition discrepancy until you get home, making sorry buyers common in today's TV market. We just went through a wedding, and each of us has started a new job. Given those scary price tags and technology that doesn't always work as advertised, I'm just not sure we need another big life change quite yet.