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The gloomy future of plasma

By Dennis P. Barker

2007 has been an interesting year for plasma displays. On the one hand, we are finally seeing models with 1080p (1920x1080) resolution come to market in 50-in. and above screen sizes. On the other hand, we are seeing tremendous price drops in models with screen resolutions of 720p (1365x768). On top of that, when going head-to-head with LCD TVs with the same features (and possibly the same price), plasma can easily lose out.

Contrary to what the key manufacturers say, “burn-in” can still be an issue to a certain degree. However, one of the troubling aspects of plasma TVs that isn't talked about a lot is the amount of energy it takes to run a plasma set. It's simply unbelievable how much power is required to keep this display powered up. On top of that, a plasma TV is best suited in those situations where people like to watch a lot of movies in a somewhat darkened room. And, let's face it, how many of us really watch TV in the dark? While LCD TVs have certain other technological faults, it certainly much easier to watch an LCD in a normally lit room.

2007 also saw some manufacturers like Toshiba and Hitachi retreat from plasma by either offering fewer models, or leaving this market segment entirely. Why? Plasma is an aging technology that will probably be replaced by LCD entirely over the next few years or so. And, if LCD is too expensive in the 50-in. plus screen sizes, there's always MicroDisplays. Now, you're probably scratching your head because you thought that MicroDisplays were dead. Well, I don't think so. I think that they have a future esp. in the U.S. market that really likes rear projection TVs.

Let's face it. All three technologies -- DLP, SXRD & HD-ILA -- are becoming slimmer and slimmer. The DLP camp is also moving towards LED and laser illumination that eliminates the color wheel and lamp. If a consumer is placing their large-screen TV on a base, does it really matter if it's LCD or MicroDisplay? Personally, I think not. Neither pulls the electricity required to operate them, and both can be viewed in normal lighting situations. Cool!

However, there are new display technologies in the wings just waiting to bust out. What are these? Well, there's OLED, FED, SED, and Carbon Nanotube just to name a few. With the upcoming IFA Show in Berlin (Aug/Sept. 2007), CEATEC in Japan (October 2007), and CES (Jan. 2008), we may well see these technologies on display in prototype form. We already know that Sony has promised an OLED TV by the Holidays this year. And, we know that companies like Toshiba and Samsung are looking at other display technologies as well. And, let's not forget about Canon either.

So, where does this leave plasma? Well, companies like Panasonic and LG that have factories will try and pump out displays for awhile before they re-tool. Other TV companies may well be able to adapt quicker to offer new display technologies with higher screen resolutions beyond 1920x1080. Isn't it a great time to be involved with the Digital TV business!