SONY ELECTRONICS is the latest consumer electronics company to embrace Tru2Way technology, which enables televisions, digital video recorders, and other devices to receive encrypted cable signals without the need for a set-top box. Sony joins LG Electronics, Panasonic, and Samsung, which had previously announced their support for Tru2Way.

Tru2Way is the successor to CableCard, which showed up on some TVs for a couple of years after its introduction but has virtually disappeared in the past year or so. Both technologies rely on a small PC Card-type module, which you obtain from your cable company and insert into the back of your TV or other device. CableCard allows only one-way communication: Devices that use it can't display program guides or receive on-demand programming—and as a result, cable companies didn't want to support it. In contrast, Tru2Way uses two-way communication to support those services, and the cable industry is on board.

Neither CableCard nor Tru2Way yet works with satellite or fiber-optic television services, though the cable industry has said that it is open to making the technology available to companies providing those services.

Besides eliminating a cable box, Tru2Way lets vendors other than your cable company offer products that can unlock encrypted channels. Samsung began shipping a Tru2Way DVR in May, and Panasonic began shipping a portable DVR in July (initially only Comcast will offer the device; Panasonic says that its DVR will eventually be available in stores and will work with any Tru2Way-enabled cable system).

The TiVo Series 3 and TiVo HD digital video recorders use CableCards, which allow them to decrypt and record the consumer electronics giant puts its weight behind Tru2Way, which uses a small card in the TV to communicate with your cable provider.

vice president for government affairs, says that the company will have two Tru2Way televisions in stores for the 2008 holiday season: a 42-inch plasma set and a 50-inch plasma set. Both will be high-end, 1080p TVs, but Fannon expects Tru2Way to trickle down to other sets and other TV manufacturers. "Now that there is certainty that the vast majority of cable customers will have access to a Tru2Way system, we can all build products that we can sell with confidence at retail," says Fannon.

LG Electronics demonstrated a Tru2Way television at the Consumer Electronics Show in January; its first implementation of the technology will likely be a TV due to arrive in 2009, says spokesperson John Taylor. As yet no other manufacturer has announced when it expects to offer Tru2Way TVs.

CableLabs, the cable industry organization that developed Tru2Way, says that it has invited other companies to join the "memorandum of understanding" that LG, Panasonic, Samsung, and Sony agreed to; at press time, however, CableLabs had not released details of the agreement because other companies were still in the process of reviewing its terms.

Budget-TV maker Vizio isn't hopping on the Tru2Way bandwagon yet. "Unlike Sony, Vizio is not going to endorse Tru2Way unless the cable industry can convince us that it will save our customers money and not just increase cable's profitability," says Vizio spokesperson Dan Noyd.

In the past, CableCard TVs cost hundreds of dollars more than comparable sets without the technology, but prices on TVs have plummeted in the past couple of years, so the premium may have shrunk. Of course, the greater the number of TV manufacturers that use the new tech, the lower the cost. "[Tru2Way] will certainly add to the cost," LG's Taylor says. "The question will be, will it add to the price?"

Panasonic's Fannon acknowledges that Tru2Way TVs will debut at a premium price, just as one-way CableCard models did a few years ago. "But we expect over a very short period of time, as more and more vendors get into the market, the competition will expand and the volume will increase," thereby reducing the premium.

—Alan Stafford