



Television going to all-digital format in 2009

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Its beam helped transport the Beatles to many Americans for the first time. It left them puzzled at who shot J.R., brought them the heights and depths of reality TV, and it's about to be switched off for the last time.

The analog signal that has been streaming through the air since the 1930s will cease on Feb. 17, 2009, and the digital delivery age will begin — meaning those aerial antennas and metal “rabbit ears” attached to the back of older sets still being used will become artifacts.

So if you are one of the estimated 14.3 million households — or 13 percent of the television-viewing audience, according to the Nielsen Company — that continue to watch TV through an analog system, the purchase of a black converter box will need to be on your shopping list before next February.

Television tech Josh Clark of Circuit City of Kingsport said this new age of TV viewing has already seen an initial surge, but it came with the introduction of high-definition sets a few years back, so some homes are already prepared for the all-digital age.

“HDTV really got things started, and I’d say within the past two years the quality of those kind of sets had people switching to digital television from the old sets that had been around forever,” said Clark.

He says the difference in watching an analog-projected signal and a digital one is like watching a movie on a videotape versus a DVD.

“Quality is the key. Thousands of UT Vols fans want to see that game in a dimension where they feel like they are there, so I feel like a lot of homes have already gotten digital-type equipment,” said Clark.

“I think the ones that are going to be hurt by this conversion are the ones who cannot really afford to go out and buy TV equipment. It’s an extra expense, but if they want to continue to watch TV, it’s something they may have to save up for.”

Clark pointed out some relief for consumers will come in special coupons approved by Congress — a \$1.5 billion expense — that will help families purchase digital converter boxes for their older TVs.

The \$40 coupons will be made available by the Federal Communication Commission for what the agency calls “inexpensive” converters.

Most major electronic retailers will be carrying the boxes, which will have a price tag between \$50 and \$70.

Circuit City corporate spokesperson Jackie Foreman says their stores are anticipating launching the digital converter box lineup in early March.

A total of 33.5 million coupons are being allocated for consumers. According to information from the Associated Press, the first 22 million will go to all households that request them. The rest will be earmarked specifically for those who do not subscribe to a pay television service like cable and satellite TV.

“A lot of the televisions that the major manufacturers have produced in the last five to 10 years already have digital or high-definition tuners (installed within the set), but people need to check their owner’s manuals or the markings on their sets to make absolutely sure,” said Clark.

The FCC had a law passed recently that requires TV companies to have integrated HDTV or digital tuners in their sets by March 2007.

If this is the first time you’ve heard about the analog-to-digital television conversion, the federal government says you’re not alone.

A report issued by the Government Accountability Office in November says that there is “no comprehensive plan” in place for the transition and that there has not been enough public education about the switch.

The Associated Press reports that a survey conducted by the Association for Public Television showed 51 percent of participants were unaware that a transition was taking place in 2009.

The analog signal will continue to be used once digital TV is up and running. The FCC plans to sell space on the analog runway, and it anticipates wireless telephone providers to be the big buyers, with estimated revenues reported to be in the \$15 billion range.

The remainder will be used to help emergency response organization better improve their capabilities of informing and helping people by using the analog range for communication.

Discount coupons can be requested by applying online at www.dtv2009.gov or by calling 1-888-DTV-2009.