

“ Digital TV switchover ”

Introduction

Australia is moving from analogue to digital television over the next three to five years. Already people are buying digital TV sets or equipment to secure digital TV. This changeover, whilst offering benefits for consumers, may also give rise to problems in some cases. This brochure helps to explain some of the background and what to look out for.

Background

What is Digital TV?

Digital TV is the broadcast and receipt of pictures and sound via digital compression. Digital TV is already partially operational and will eventually replace traditional analogue TV in Australia.

How do consumers get Digital TV?

Digital TV programming can be accessed in one of two ways:

- 1 Through a specifically designed TV set or display screen, or
- 2 Through a standard TV set coupled with a set-top box.

The set-top box can be bought separately, or may come with a pay-TV service such as Foxtel Digital.

Prices for set-top boxes range from \$70 to \$1,200 depending upon functionality. Prices of integrated digital TVs start at around \$900.

CHOICE provides a guide to digital TV at www.choice.com.au¹ which includes advice on formats, coverage, channels, as well as independent reviews of products.

Industry organisation, Digital Broadcasting Australia, also has a guide for purchasers at www.dba.org.au² and also has a list of equipment and features for easy comparison.

Why?

Digital TV can provide a clearer picture, improved sound, widescreen format, and additional digital services such as interactive services.

When?

The switchover will mean consumers will be unable to receive TV transmissions without the right equipment.

Current target for switchover is 2010-2012.

¹ See <http://www.choice.com.au/viewArticle.aspx?id=105365&catId=100170&tid=100008&p=1&title=Digital+TV>

² See http://www.dba.org.au/uploads/documents/Shopping_DTV_ReceiverFeb04.pdf

Regulation

The technical details of the switchover are covered by Commonwealth broadcasting industry-specific regulation. However, this legislation does not cover consumer protection matters.

General consumer protection legislation in the Trade Practices Act and State Fair Trading Acts apply to the sale of digital TV equipment to consumers.

Issues

Blackspots

There will likely be communities and areas of Australia, or 'blackspots', that will not have adequate digital reception. This is an issue that is being handled by the Australian Communications and Media Authority. However, consumers will have some expectation that the equipment they are sold can be used. Consumers' implied statutory warranties covering purchases may be breached if consumers buy equipment that cannot be used due to blackspots. There are some similarities regarding this issue to mobile phone network coverage and consumers being sold a service they cannot access.

Picture quality

The quality of digital TV reception, like analogue TV reception, still depends on the quality of the consumer's antenna and associated cabling. Poor reception with digital transmissions can result in no picture being received at all, compared to a "noisy" picture with analogue TV. Consumers should consult a qualified installer. There is also an industry guide for troubleshooting digital TV reception issues at www.dba.org.au/newsletter/troubleshooting.asp. This guide also has details of qualified installers in Victoria.

Beware of misleading claims

There have been cases where representations at point-of-sale or on product description labels in stores have suggested that the TV set is "digital TV-ready". Consumers have taken this to mean that the TV set will be able to receive digital signals without further purchases, that is, it has an integrated digital TV receiver. However, in fact it was claimed that this just meant the TV had a separate socket for a set-top box to be connected. Depending on the facts of the case, this practice may be misleading and in breach of fair trading laws.

Example

A consumer purchased an \$8,000 TV set on the understanding that it would be "digital-TV-ready" later. The consumer claimed the salesperson said at the time of purchase that the TV set would be able to receive digital signals. He found later that this was not the case. The consumer asked for a store credit. He claimed the store admitted they gave incorrect information. The consumer was advised to write to the store with a request for a store credit, and lodge a complaint with Consumer Affairs Victoria online if the issue was not resolved.

Units and apartments

Many apartments and units share a communal master antenna. Many of these would need to be upgraded before individual units can receive digital TV. Consumers should consult their body corporate. Consumers' implied statutory warranties covering purchases may be breached if consumers buy digital TV equipment they cannot use having told the salesperson they live in an apartment or unit.

Sustainability

Whilst there appears to be no real indication of whether the move to digital television will see a marked increase in TVs being turned over and subsequently disposed of, there are concerns in general around the disposal of old electronic devices.

To this end, the Victorian Government has pledged to establish 12 "Byte Back" centres to specifically recycle household appliances, such as batteries, TVs, computers and other electronic equipment.

These centres, of which two are currently operating in Boroondara and Geelong, will provide consumers with a viable option for the sustainable disposal of such products.

Further reading

The Digital TV Switchover is not solely an Australian phenomenon, with similar transitions taking place in Europe, Asia and North America.

In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is overseeing the transition to digital TV by February 2009. The FCC has a consumer-oriented site at www.dtv.gov and a regulatory site at www.fcc.gov.dtv/.

In the UK, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is overseeing a staged switchover between 2008 and 2012. Further information can be found at www.digitaltelevision.gov.uk.

Complaints

Complaints about faulty digital TV equipment, advertising and representations made at point-of sale about the suitability and features of digital TV equipment can be brought to Consumer Affairs Victoria or the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC).

Complaints about digital TV coverage matters can be directed to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

Complaints about the closure of the analogue TV network can be directed to the Commonwealth Government.

Contacts

Consumer Affairs Victoria

Victorian Consumer & Business Centre
113 Exhibition Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000
Telephone 1300 55 81 81 (local call charge)
Facsimile (03) 8684 6295
Email consumer@justice.vic.gov.au
Website www.consumer.vic.gov.au
TIS 131 450

Textphone (TTY) or modem users only, ring the NRS on 133 677, then quote 1300 55 81 81.

Callers who use Speech to Speech Relay dial 1300 555 727, then quote 1300 55 81 81.

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)

InfoCentre 1300 302 502

Translating and Interpreting Service for information in languages other than English: call 131 450 and ask for 1300 302 502

TTY Service for people with hearing or speech difficulties: 1300 303 609

Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)

If you consider your digital reception to be inadequate or fall into a 'blackspot' category you should contact ACMA on 1300 850 115 or email at aas@acma.gov.au

Commonwealth Minister for Communications

Office of the Minister for Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
www.minister.dcita.gov.au/Contact

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