

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

Television is Going Digital: Get the Picture

Big changes are coming to your television. But they have nothing to do with summer re-runs or the new fall season. These changes involve the transition to digital broadcasting on February 17, 2009.

For millions of Americans — those whose televisions are already hooked up to cable or satellite or those who have televisions with built-in digital tuners — the transition should be seamless. But if you get your programming on an analog television through a rooftop antenna or “rabbit ears,” you will have to take action to keep your TV sets working after the transition. You can:

- connect your analog TV to a converter box that will get digital reception;
- connect your analog TV to a paid service like cable or satellite; or
- buy a TV with a built-in digital tuner.

Through a program run by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, part of the U.S. Department of Commerce, every household can get two coupons — each worth \$40 — to help defray the cost of the converter boxes. Most of the boxes cost between \$50 and \$70; you can order the coupons online at www.dtv2009.gov or by phone at 1-888-DTV-2009.

Congress ordered the change to all-digital broadcasting to free up channels for police, fire, and emergency personnel. According to the Federal Communications Commission, the agency that oversees the nation’s airwaves, the digital transition offers benefits beyond public safety: it will open the door to new wireless services for consumers, allow TV stations to offer better picture and sound quality, and enable TV stations to broadcast several programs at the same time.

If You’re Considering Using a Coupon to Buy a Converter Box...

Government coupons for converter boxes are available on a “use it or lose it” basis for 90 days after they are mailed to you: if you don’t use your coupons within 90 days, you cannot get replacement coupons. You can apply one coupon toward the purchase of each converter box so you’ll need two coupons only if you need two converter boxes. It’s illegal to sell the coupons, but you can give them to a family member or friend.

All coupon-eligible converter boxes must be able to receive digital signals over the air and convert them to analog signals that your analog television can display. Still, different brands of converters offer different features. For example, one popular feature called “analog pass-through” lets you keep getting analog signals from stations that haven’t yet switched to digital, as well as from some low power stations that will continue to broadcast an analog signal after February 17, 2009. Low power stations serve a very small area or bring in the signal of a larger station that is far away.

With many consumers in the market for converter boxes, subscription services, or digital televisions, the Federal Trade Commission, the nation’s consumer protection agency, has some shopping tips to make sure you continue to get your favorite television programs come February 2009:

1. Never pay for a coupon for a digital converter box. The coupons are free from the federal government.

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2. Don't give your Social Security number or other sensitive financial information when you order — or redeem — your coupon.
 3. If you return a converter box you bought using a coupon, you can't get the value of the coupon back. Before you buy a converter box, ask the retailer about the box's features, any manufacturer's warranty, and the store's return policy.
 4. Before you leave the store with your new converter box, check to make sure installation instructions are included. If you have questions, ask the retailer to explain the installation — or check to see whether the manufacturer offers a toll-free help line. You can find general installation instructions at www.dtv.gov/publications.html.
 5. Installing a converter box is easy, but if you decide to hire someone to install it, get the price in writing before you agree to the job, and put any personal information you may keep in your home in a safe place.
 6. Ignore any offer for a “free” converter box, especially if it requires you to pay for shipping or a warranty. The companies that are making these offers are not certified by the government, and their converter boxes are not eligible for the coupon program.

If You're Considering Subscribing to Cable, Satellite, or Other Pay TV Service...

If you have an analog TV and you decide to subscribe to cable, satellite, or another type of pay TV service, contact your local providers to see what kinds of services are available in your area. Compare prices and terms, service commitments, and customer satisfaction rates. The transition to digital broadcasting affects free over-the-air television broadcasting, not cable or satellite service you pay for. To keep getting free, over-the-air broadcasts on any analog TV that is not connected to the pay service, you will need a digital converter box.

If You Buy a New Television...

If you decide to buy a new television with a built-in digital tuner (also called a digital receiver), you won't have to order a coupon or buy and install a converter box unless you also want to keep your old analog television on hand. If you currently get good reception on channels 2 - 51, you shouldn't have to get a new antenna for a new digital television. Nor will you need to buy a high definition television (HDTV) to get a digital picture.

Check your owner's manual to see if the televisions you have are analog or digital. If you decide to shop for a new TV, make sure the label and the packaging say that the television has a built-in digital tuner. You might get a great price on an analog television — either from retailers or people in your community who are selling them — but every analog set — including small and battery-powered televisions and televisions in your RV — will need a converter box to get a digital picture, and you will need to order a coupon if you want to take advantage of the government's program.

For More Information

About coupons and converter boxes:

www.dtv2009.gov or call 1-888-DTV-2009 (TTY: 1-877-530-2634).

About the transition to digital television:

www.dtv.gov or call 1-888-CALL-FCC (TTY: 1-888-835-5322).

About consumer protection in general:

ftc.gov or call 1-877-FTC-HELP (TTY: 1-866-653-4261).

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