Trade group can't tune in digital TVs' power usage

by Jonathan Sidener

The Consumer Electronics Association - the main trade group for gadget makers - recently put out an extensive report looking at the power used by home electronics.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of the 147-page document is the section that was left out: digital TV.

The association tells us how much power the average home answering machine uses, along with DVD players and cordless phones. But it won't say how much juice digital TVs suck up.

It's not a trivial question. There are an estimated 30 million or more HDTVs in American homes, with 16 million more expected to sell this year. Of home electronics rated in the report, analog TVs are the biggest power consumer. And when people take the plunge to digital TV, most upgrade to a bigger TV than the one they're replacing.

Bigger-screen HDTVs use more power. I'd point out how much more, but the CEA and its member TV manufacturers won't say.

The association's position is that it can't say because "a standard test procedure that accurately characterizes DTV active mode power draw does not yet exist."

Pardon my skepticism, but this is an industry driven by many of the brightest minds in the world.

They figured out how to put 2 million movable mirrors on an HDTV processor roughly the size of a postage stamp. And they can't accurately measure the power HDTVs use when turned on? I'm at a loss for words, at least ones that we can print in a family newspaper.

The first HDTVs were displayed at the Consumer Electronics Show nine years ago. In nearly a decade, they haven't figured out how to measure the gadgets' power consumption? Obviously, there's been a lot of foot-dragging going on.

Imagine a drunken-driving suspect telling the cop he can't take a Breathalyzer test because it's not an internationally standardized test procedure. That's not going to fly.

Apparently, the holdup for several years was that the manufacturers couldn't agree on the type of content to display during the test. Different types of content - static or dynamic, dark or bright - affect the power consumption of various HDTV technologies. So a company that makes mainly LCD televisions might want one type of content, while a plasma powerhouse might fight for something else.

In what seems like it should have been a no-brainer years ago, the manufacturers have recently reached consensus on the test data, according to the association.

Consumers don't watch test patterns, static or dynamic. They watch high-def sports and prime-time programming on their new TVs. They play video games. They watch DVDs and standard-definition programs because there's still a shortage of quality high-def content.

So the companies will make a representative sample of what people watch and make everyone test their TVs using that content.

The big losers in all this are the consumers who care about the cost or environmental impact of powering a TV over its life.

The Natural Resources Defense Council tested a number of HDTVs last year and found that power consumption varies greatly and not in any clear way along technology types or brand names.

Without testing, there's no way to tell whether that sparkling flat-panel TV on the showroom floor is a model of efficiency or a power hog. And without some sort of reporting system, there's no incentive for companies to develop more efficient TVs.

The Consumer Electronics Association says a draft of the standard should be done soon. Manufacturers will then use the agreed-upon video to test their TVs.

By the middle of the year, the group expects to update its power-consumption report to include HDTVs.

That will provide some information on the overall power consumption by HDTVs nationwide. It may provide some general answers on the efficiency of the competing technologies - plasma, LCD, CRT and

projection. But it won't help consumers trying to decide between two TVs on the showroom floor.

That will take more time. The federal Environmental Protection Agency will use the draft standard to develop a rating system for HDTVs under its Energy Star program.

The EPA program will allow companies to use the Energy Star logo to market the most efficient TVs. And it will post a list of the top performers on the Energy Star Web site.

The first Energy Star HDTVs could appear on the market by July 2008, said Brian Markwalter, CEA vice president for technology and standards.

The glass-half-full crowd will say "better 10 1/2 years late than never."

The rest of us will remain skeptically speechless.

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