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TiVo, 'VCR on steroids,' selling 'extremely well'

TV recording device available in U.S. for years is welcomed with open wallets in B.C. stores

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Like many marketing managers, Lee Scherbinsky can talk a blue streak about a new product.

But in the case of TiVo, the television recording device, which arrived in British Columbia stores just days ago, Scherbinsky has a personal interest because he got one for himself.

"TiVo is like a VCR on steroids," said Scherbinsky, home theatre merchandise manager for Future Shop, from the company's head office in Burnaby.

"The user experience is so remarkable," said Scherbinsky, who's had his TiVo for 10 days.

TiVo, which has been available in the U.S. for almost a decade but only reached Canada within the last two weeks, is known as a "smart recorder" of television programming.

The box device, which requires a permanent Internet cable connection or a wireless adapter, will record shows with very little searching. If, say, you like Clint Eastwood westerns but don't like his cop movies, you can punch in "Clint Eastwood western" and the TiVo will record every Eastwood cowboy movie that comes up in your service area for as long as you like.

It can record two shows at once, or pause live television in case you have to leave the room.

Like a VCR, it can skip past commercials, a plus for viewers who don't want to sit through a two- or three-minute delay when viewing shows and movies.

The TiVo box, which has an 80-gigabyte hard drive, sells for \$200. A wireless adapter retails for \$59.

Customers who purchase TiVo must also pay for a monthly or annual subscription charge for the service, which is \$12.95 a month or \$129 a year.

Future Shop only got TiVo in all its stores on Tuesday, but accepted pre-orders from customers, who got a free wireless adapter with the order.

Susan Kirk, communications manager at Future Shop, said pre-orders were heavy, and she anticipates TiVo will be a big seller during the Christmas shopping period.

TiVo may have a relatively short shelf life, however, because it does not work with high definition (HD) television programming in Canada.

You can get an HD TiVo box in the U.S., but not in Chilliwack or Vancouver. Because of that, Scherbinsky believes that sales "are going to be tempered, to some degree," because most televisions bought now are HDTVs, although that doesn't necessarily mean that the HDTV buyer is receiving HD programming.

"Less than 10 per cent of people who buy an HDTV buy HD programming," said Scherbinsky, adding that those who want a similar device for HD programming will likely get the Shaw box.

Colin Cottrell, merchandise manager for electronics and audio-video systems at London Drugs, said customer reaction to the TiVo has been very strong.

"The sell-through has been incredible considering we haven't done any advertising," said Cottrell, who added that the first ad for TiVo appeared in a Tuesday flyer, more than a week after the stores had the device.

"A lot of customers have known about the product for several years, and don't need really need much explanation," said Cottrell.

"Others have heard about TiVo, and are coming in and asking lots of questions, and a good percentage of them are buying.

"It's been selling extremely well," said Cottrell, who wonders if he should have ordered more TiVos on his initial order.

Best Buy and The Brick stores also sell the TiVo.

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INCREASING COMMERCIAL BREAKS ADD TO TIVO'S APPEAL

Just like VCRs and digital video recorders, the new-to-Canada TiVo can fast-forward through commercials when you play back your favourite shows or movies recorded off television.

Sometimes those commercial breaks seem interminable, running for two, three, four minutes at a time. But, then, who's counting?

The CRTC, that's who.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission has explicit rules as to how much advertising television stations in Canada can carry.

On Sept. 1, that limit rose from 12 minutes to 14 minutes per hour in the prime-time period of 7 p.m. to 11 p.m., and 12 minutes per hour for the rest of the broadcast day.

Half-hour prime-time shows are limited to seven minutes of ads. A two-hour show can package the ads any way it wants (and the tendency is to place more ads as the show reaches its climax), provided the prime-time total does not exceed 28 minutes.

Specialty services -- cable and satellite outlets with paid subscribers -- can carry 12 minutes of ads per hour of their broadcast day.

The exceptions are community channels, which cannot carry commercial advertising other than sponsorship ads (although community-based stations and digital services with fewer than 2,000 subscribers can carry 12 minutes of local advertising), and pay-TV services, which carry no ads.

Next September, the CRTC limit rises to 15 minutes per hour per broadcast day. But it's 2009 when items like TiVo will be in demand, because that's when the CRTC lifts all time limits on commercials.