TV makers ready to test depths of market for 3-D

PETER SVENSSON - AP Technology Writer - Associated Press

This is supposedly the year 3-D television becomes the hot new thing: Updated sets and disc players are coming out, and 3-D cable channels are in the works. But it's not clear the idea will reach out and grab mainstream viewers.

Besides having to spring for expensive new TVs, people would have to put on awkward special glasses to give the picture the illusion of depth. That limits 3-D viewing to times when viewers can sit down and focus on a movie or show.

It's one thing to put on 3-D glasses in a theater, but "at home, you're with other people in the living room, running to the kitchen and doing other things," said Greg Ireland of the research firm IDC.

Unfazed by the potential hang-ups, the biggest TV makers began revealing their 3-D models Wednesday before the official opening of the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas.

First up was LG Electronics Inc., which said it will introduce 47-inch and 55-inch flat-panel TVs with 3-D capabilities in May. LG plans a 3-D Blu-ray disc player sometime later.

LG didn't announce exact prices. But Tim Alessi, director of product development at LG Electronics USA, said 3-D models will likely cost $200 to $300 more than comparable flat-panel sets without 3-D capabilities, which already run more than $1,000.

Announcements of 3-D TV sets were also expected from Samsung Electronics Co., Sony Corp. and Panasonic Corp.

Of course, movies in 3-D have been around since the 1950s and from time to time have been billed as the next big thing in entertainment. And technically speaking, 3-D viewing in the home has been possible for the past few years. But there has been no good way to get 3-D movies and shows to watch.

That obstacle is being swept away this year, as plans for a 3-D version of the Blu-ray disc have solidified. Players are expected this spring. On Tuesday, two major cable networks — ESPN and Discovery — said they plan to start beaming 3-D entertainment into homes for the first time.

ESPN plans to have its channel running in time to show World Cup soccer matches in 3-D on June 11. Discovery Communications Inc. will partner with Imax Corp. and Sony to bring out its own full-time 3-D network in 2011.

Toshiba Corp. isn't waiting for 3-D programming: It plans to roll out a new line of

five TVs this year that will take regular 2-D programming and convert it to 3-D using a separate box with a powerful processor similar to one used in the Sony PlayStation 3.

Toshiba didn't announce prices for the sets, but they will probably be expensive. The company also didn't demonstrate the technology, and some people in the industry scoff at the idea of on-the-fly conversion, suspecting it won't be as good as footage shot with special 3-D cameras.

TV manufacturers, movie studios and broadcasters are counting on the excitement around the latest wave of 3-D movies in theaters to finally drive interest in adapting the technology for the home. In particular, James Cameron's "Avatar" has set a new standard for 3-D in movies and has surpassed $1 billion at the box office. It demonstrates that 3-D is viable for more than just computer-animated children's or family movies such as "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs."

"The hopes of the industry have undoubtedly been raised by the success of 'Avatar,'" said NPD analyst Ross Rubin.

But it's not clear people will be eager to pony up the premium prices for 3-D in the home, or even that the experience will translate well from the movie theater to the living room. (It is possible to do 3-D TV without glasses, but those solutions usually require viewers to keep their heads in one particular place. The image quality is also lower.)

Viewing 3-D discs will require new Blu-ray players that could cost a few hundred dollars, to the possible annoyance of people who invested in regular Blu-ray players in the past several years. And it may be difficult to tempt shoppers to buy new TVs after the flat-panel binge of the last few years.

Jay Weil, 42, a day trader from San Francisco, said he's unlikely to jump in to buy 3-D technology right away because he bought a new 52-inch, high-definition TV about six months ago for $1,800. He's got no problems with the setup.

"I'm not suffering, even though it's 2-D," he said Wednesday inside a Best Buy store in San Francisco.

Analyst Riddhi Patel at iSuppli Corp. said one target market would probably be people who have moved the flat panels they bought a few years ago into their bedrooms and now want new sets for their living rooms.

Or TV makers can count on hitting the mainstream later and aim for enthusiasts first — people such as Michael Pearce, 39, a supervisor at a biotechnology company.

Pearce loves the thrill of new electronics even though his family tells him he's gone overboard. He says he has bought 12 flat-screen TVs in the last three years and sells the old ones on eBay whenever he upgrades.

"I like to see how they push the envelope. I like to see what's next," he said. "Three-D TV is like, wow. You have to go to the movies for that."

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AP Business Writer Andrew Vanacore in New York and AP Technology Writer Jordan Robertson in San Francisco contributed to this report.

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