

The Lowdown on HDTV

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(Written for Yahoo! Tech Job Interview - February 2006) Every week or so I spend a little time at the electronics store to see what's new and look for great deals. But the part I enjoy most is quietly eavesdropping on the sales associates doing their thing. Last time I listened as he explained the world of high definition televisions to two women. I can imagine that it's a tough sell. Try to convince them to spend more for a smaller television and it looks like you're just after the commission. Sell them a big television with so-so picture quality and you don't have the customer's satisfaction in mind.

Back in the day, there were really only two choices. There was the big screen and your standard television. Now the landscape is ridiculously complicated. There are LCD (Liquid Crystal Display), Plasma, DLP (Digital Light Processor), LCoS (Liquid Crystal on Silicon), and LCD Projection. Then there are a bunch of other terms like EDTV (Enhanced Definition Television), HDTV (High Definition Television), 720p, 1080i, and 1080p to confuse the matter even more. How are consumers supposed to figure all this out? Well, for televisions under 42 inches, LCD's are the way to go. Above 42 inches, plasma is your best bet. You won't find a plasma under 42 inches anyway and LCD's that size are so expensive you'll cringe. Despite the attractive price, I'd skip DLP, LCoS, and LCD Projection televisions altogether because they've got terrible viewing angles. That's why they're always on stands at eye level in the electronics store. Sit off to the side, too low or too high and it's impossible to see. How about all those numbers? 720 and 1080 refers to the number of horizontal lines in the television. A standard television displays 480 lines. The letter 'i' means interlaced and 'p' is progressive. Interlaced means only half the picture is displayed every 1/60th of a second, so edges aren't as smooth since the two halves don't always lineup perfectly. With progressive, the entire picture is put on the screen at the same time. So 1080p is the best looking HDTV you can get, but it also comes with the highest price. So, what's this EDTV stuff? An EDTV looks better than your regular television, but it's not true high definition because it only supports 480 lines. They can handle a high definition signal, but it's still not, so skip it. I've got two other pieces of advice. Get an HDMI (High definition Multi-media Interface) connection on the television. HDMI is the interface you'll find on all the high definition DVD players that'll be out later this year. And don't worry about the built-in high definition tuner you see in advertisements unless you're planning on watching with an antenna. If you're watching high definition from your cable or satellite company, you'll need their tuner box anyway.