

## Technology

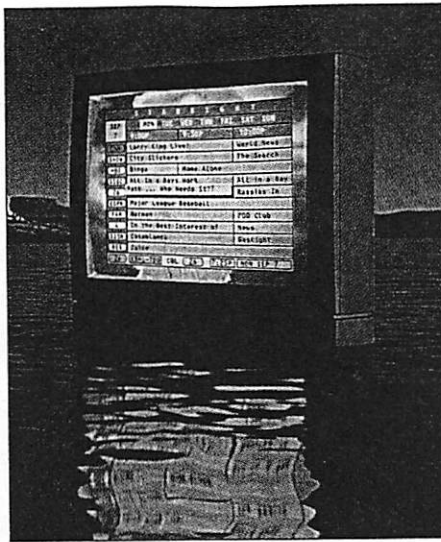
# Finally — TVs That Really Are Interactive

By Jeff Sipe

**New on-screen programming systems are slugging it out in the marketplace — and in the courts.**

**W**ith the dream — or nightmare — of the 500-channel cable system closer to reality, electronics manufacturers have been spending millions developing products to help viewers navigate TVland. According to one Silicon Valley company, StarSight Telecast, 60 million households subscribe to cable systems with more than 30 channels, but 90 percent of those subscribers say they have trouble finding something to watch. Also, 70 percent of the more than 75 million people owning videocassette recorders in the United States still cannot tape a program with their own equipment.

StarSight, the first company to market an on-screen interactive programming guide — including what they call a one-touch recording system — would like to lay claim to the next generation of television technology meant to make



StarSight: One-touch video recording.

program selection and videotaping user-friendly. But Gemstar Development Corp., creator of VCR Plus (videotaping by code) and the yet-to-be-released Guide Plus+ (an on-screen guide and taping system) has other plans. Gemstar has brought a patent-infringement suit against StarSight, an action that highlights the intense competition in the video marketplace.

Meanwhile, the Prevue Channel, the only on-screen programming system up and running on a large scale, “is pulling down ratings comparable to some cable stations,” says Mark Beniker of *Broadcasting and Cable Magazine*. Prevue, however, is available only on cable, and outside of a few test sites it is not interactive; that is, Prevue’s information scrolls up the screen without viewer control.



Hello, globe: Intro to Internet.

## ETV Modems Home

**A**merica is logging on to the Internet, but millions have yet to interface with cyberspace. Entrepreneur Television, or ETV, an Atlanta-based company, hopes to make the process less intimidating with its kit, “An Introduction to the Internet: What to Know & How to Get On.”

The kit contains a booklet, video and floppy disk (for Macintosh or Windows), but glitzy graphics and special effects often override simple instructions and demonstrations, and a significant part of the 45-minute video is wasted on silly skits. But according to ETV’s operations manager Michelle Hodges, “While there are other companies out there that are making Internet videos, no one else also provides diskettes” that are system-specific.

ETV won’t take the last byte out of the Internet, but it helps novices take that first step. The kit costs \$29.95 plus \$4.50 for shipping and handling. Call (404) 355-5800.

By Jeff Kessler

StarSight, on the other hand, broadcasts its scheduling information on part of PBS’ signal (called VBI, or video-blanking interval), updating programming information daily. It is completely interactive, allowing viewers to jump about schedules at will and view them according to various hierarchies: by time, by channel, by program genre — comedy, movies, sports and so on. Viewers watching a program also can call up windows with text descriptions of concurrent offerings. “This is called ‘the marriage saver,’” explains a StarSight marketing manager.

But the feature that the company touts most is one-touch video recording capability. After calling up the schedule, viewers can choose to record specific shows by highlighting their selections and then pressing a “record” button. The viewer is given the option of one-time, one-week or one-month recording of each selection — a month of *Seinfeld*, for example, with the flick of a finger.

StarSight already is available in some models of Zenith and Mitsubishi televisions and Samsung and Goldstar VCRs. The company says that up to 40 models of 10 different products with StarSight capabilities will carry the programming system by year’s end. StarSight users must pay an activation and subscription fee that ranges from \$3.95 to \$6 a month, depending upon location and length of subscription.

Gemstar’s Guide Plus+ offers similar features with a significant difference: It does not require an activation or subscription fee. “If we want to be a broad standard,” says Gemstar Chief Executive Officer Henry Yuen, “subscription fees will never make it.” Guide Plus+ also offers real-time programming updates so that broadcasters can show changes to their schedules at any time. Other companies also are competing for a market niche. “TV Guide on Screen,” a joint venture of *TV Guide* and Tele-Communications Inc., or TCI, is testing a noninteractive system.

As with all new technology, acceptance rests in the hands of consumers. This time, however, the courts may play a role. Gemstar’s complaints against StarSight actually charge three patent infringements, the most significant of which concerns the selection of a television program by theme from an on-screen guide. Though the court battle is of little practical interest to the consumer, it may determine which of the two developers of different-but-similar systems makes the biggest initial splash in the market. Stay tuned. ●