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Put Your PC (& The Internet) On The Big Screen

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Lifestyle Close-up

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Put Your PC (& The Internet) On The Big Screen

Stream Multimedia To Your HDTV



Computers are so good at storing and playing multimedia and streaming it from the Web (see the “What Can I Stream?” sidebar) that it’s a shame they are typically relegated to the den and connected to a small monitor and a set of tinny speakers. Wouldn’t it be nice if you could bring all of that multimedia prowess into your living room and enjoy it on your big HDTV and surround-sound setup? Well, with a home network, the right

hardware, and a little bit of know-how, you can.

■ Start With The Network

Very few of the things we are about to discuss work without a home network, so your first order of business is purchasing a wireless router that lets all of your equipment share data and a single Internet connection. For best results, get a router that supports 802.11g, 802.11a, and 802.11n (often called Wireless N, Dual-N Band, or similar) to achieve maximum compatibility and streaming performance. Using 802.11n is ideal if you want to stream high-definition video, but be sure to use 802.11n networking products that are all from the same company to guarantee compatibility. Broadband Internet access is also a must so you can stream high-quality video from the Internet without interruption.

■ From The PC To The HDTV

If you want to access content that is stored on your PC from your home theater, a media extender is a good fit. These come as standalone devices and are also integrated into some video-game consoles. They don’t have any internal storage space but stream multimedia over a home network directly from a PC. All media extenders use their own proprietary interfaces for accessing multimedia content, but most are so streamlined that they are easy to use. Setting up a media extender is usually easy. You install software on your PC, turn on the media extender so the PC detects it, and then use the remote control that came with the media extender to navigate video, pictures, and music that is streamed over your home network from the PC.



Some devices, such as the logear Wireless Audio/Video Kit (\$349.95; www.iogear.com), project exactly what is displayed on your computer’s screen on your HDTV instead of using their own special interface. This lets you use your HDTV as though it’s a computer monitor without having to string any wires to connect the two. You can watch DVDs or browse the Web just as though you were sitting at your computer, only you’re doing it from the couch.

**Iogear Wireless
Wireless Audio/ Video
Kit**
\$349.95
www.iogear.com

If you don't want to have to leave your computer on all the time to access content using a media extender, there's an alternative. Media hubs are devices with integrated storage for holding movies, music, and other multimedia, and it is all managed from your PC and is accessible from a home theater. You can use a media extender to connect to it and stream multimedia over your home network. Video—particularly high-definition—requires a lot of storage space, so be sure to buy a media hub with at least 500GB of built-in storage. Ideally, it should also have expansion slots or ports so you can add extra storage later, if necessary.

■ Forget The Box

When shopping for home-theater equipment, be on the lookout for HDTVs that have PC multimedia streaming capabilities built in, eliminating the need to hook up any separate equipment to process the stream and pass it along to the television. HDTVs with integrated streaming also let you mount the set on the wall without needing to worry about hiding an extra cable, so they are a great way of keeping your home entertainment center looking tidy without sacrificing the benefits of multimedia streaming. ■

by Tracy Baker

What Can I Stream?

Aside from music, movies, and videos stored on your PC, you can stream the Internet's vast collection of multimedia over your wireless network to enjoy in your home theater. Use the setup outlined above to access the following sites from your couch.

■ Audio

Last.fm
www.last.fm

This is perhaps the most full-featured streaming audio and video site on the Internet. It lets you search for specific tunes you like, or you can type an artist or genre into the Radio panel to create your own custom station that plays that type of music.

Pandora
www.pandora.com

This is a great free service that lets you search for a song title or artist to create a radio station based on its musical details. You can individually rate songs to fine-tune each of your custom stations. It's also a terrific way to discover new bands that match your music taste.

■ Video

YouTube
www.youtube.com

YouTube is the most popular video site on the Internet, for good reason. Users have submitted clips covering nearly every topic imaginable, and you can surf the site for months and never see the same thing twice.

Hulu
www.hulu.com

This is one of the few video-streaming services offering legitimate versions of copyrighted programming from the major networks at no charge, including popular shows such as "Family Guy," "The Office," and "Heroes."

Netflix

www.netflix.com

Netflix's Watch Instantly video-streaming service (available only to subscribers) puts thousands of movies and TV shows on tap. You can watch as many of them as you wish each month, and new content is added all of the time.

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