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Home Theater: Sound and Pictures All Around You

Cathy Dausman



One click on the remote switches the TV to a projector and rolls down a large screen. Photos Andy Scheck

Your sound system must be set to decode one of those systems. Blessing says "you can get amazing sound" from a 5.1 speaker sound system. In the 5.1 system, three speakers are placed left, center and right on a plane even with the viewing screen. The fourth and fifth speakers reside behind the viewing area. A subwoofer addition (the ".1" in the system) reinforces bass sounds. Additional side speakers along the length of the room would create a 7.1 or 9.1 system, and put everyone in the middle of the sound action.

There are two options for the visual portion of the home theater experience. While most families build a "family room" theater with a giant flat panel screen in a multi-use room, a truly cinematic experience - and one Blessing cautions comes with a much higher price tag - involves creating a dedicated theater room with full light control and two-piece viewing system of ceiling projector and wall screen.

Those very different technologies really come down to a lifestyle choice, she says. Is a home theater high on the "need or want" list for home buyers? Not really, says Alain Pinel realtor Diane Reilly, even in the higher price range homes. It is more important, she says, that the great room, family room or living room have a wall large enough to accommodate a big screen TV (50 inches or more) positioned for good viewing.

So why hire an audio/video consultant when you can simply buy the items from a big box store? Norleen says some folks simply "don't want the hassle" of assembling the system.

Blessing suggests those who hire a contractor verify that the company is both a licensed contractor and an authorized dealer of the audio/video products they sell. "If you buy on the internet," Blessing says, "you'll get speakers but no warranty."

Scott Curtis, owner of Eclipse Audio & Video in Walnut Creek says LED and Plasma flat screen TVs are now competitively priced. Plasma screens are generally 10 to 15 percent less expensive than a similar sized LED. A lower-end 50-inch Plasma TV can be purchased for \$650 to \$700 while a similar sized LED would sell for around \$1200 retail.

And additional home theater equipment costs quickly add up. For example, you can expect to pay \$500 and up for a mid-range quality receiver, Curtis says, and free-standing 5.1 surround sound speakers are priced from \$125 to \$2,500 apiece for the front trio alone (left, center and right channels).

Curtis suggests getting a TV "as big as the room can bear," giving the viewer full immersion for wide screen action with movies or video games, and it's a good idea to balance timbre in all five speakers. Whatever your component selection, be sure to include labor charges in your budget as well.

As today's home entertainment concept becomes an immersive experience - a sort of "smart phone" extension inside the home - with movies and games, home theater has a place for young and old alike.

Of course, even in Lamorinda, there are holdouts. Wendy Jacobs reports that she creates her own surround sound during football season: "I simply turn my stereo on with the broadcast and crank up the volume," she says, providing her family with "big screen TV with big time sound, for a lot less than a home theater."

Contact information:

Sound Works, Andrew Norleen (925) 209-7001 or email soundworksandrew@hotmail.com.

Eclipse Audio-Video Inc (925) 934-4844



A family room after adding a home theater system by Paradigm Integration. Photo provided



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Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

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