

TUNE IN, TURN ON, DROP LOTS OF CASH



A salesman shows off some newer model plasma and LCD digital televisions to a customer Nov. 14 at the Little Guys in Glenwood.

JOSEPH P. MEIER — SOUTHTOWNSTAR

Americans can't enough of the ubiquitous television

BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK
STAFF WRITER

Ask Fredo Cruz what he did during the month after his 60-inch projection television died.

"Suffered," the Oak Lawn car salesman said, after a pause. "Suffered."

Fredo Cruz dropped \$3,700 some 17 years ago on exactly the giant projection set he wanted.

"I was making the money, and I wanted entertainment," the 47-year-old said. "I wanted to watch football games."

Despite a bad car market, Cruz wanted to keep watching football and boxing, so he found a replacement TV for about \$1,800, a 52-inch flat screen.

"It's fantastic. I don't have any complaints at all," Cruz said. "I keep things a very, very long time so I make sure I spend my money wisely."

Cruz isn't the only one to believe that spending nearly \$2,000 on 52 inches of flat-screen television is wise. Digital TVs come with price tags that seem to add a zero to those of their analog components.

Still, they're still selling like mad. So when did it become OK to spend the equivalent of a mortgage payment on a TV?

Right after everyone bought the last model, experts say, because the only way to distinguish class from mass is to own a finer television than everyone else.

"Television is the ultimate symbol of consumer culture," said Tim Kasser, who teaches psychology at Knox College in Galesburg and authored "The High Price of Materialism" in 2002. "We create our lives around consumption and around having money and spending that money on possessions, and particularly on possessions that say, 'We've made it.'"

"TV is a particularly interesting case because television is the means through which people are likely to receive those messages which encourage them to be consumers."

And, he said, big shiny screens scream out, "We're worthy people," by the definition of consumer society.

TV is everywhere

More adults own a TV than any other gadget — 98 percent, compared to 76 percent of adults owning a cell phone and 62 percent having a digital camera, according to the Consumer Electronics Association, an industry group that did a survey in May 2007.

Half of homes have at least three televisions; in 1975 only 11 percent of U.S. households had more than

TUNING IN TO TV HISTORY						
Year	Type of TV	Industry sales in millions	Average TV price	% of homes with TV	Average family income	TV cost as % of income
1946	B&W	\$1	\$167	N/A	N/A	
1947	B&W	\$50	\$279		\$3,031	9.2%
1948	B&W	\$226	\$233		\$3,187	7.3%
1949	B&W	\$574	\$193		\$3,107	6.2%
1950	B&W	\$1,397	\$190		\$3,319	5.7%
1955	Color	\$10	\$500	0.0%	\$4,418	11.3%
	B&W	\$1,068	\$138		\$4,418	3.1%
1960	Color	\$47	\$392	0.7%	\$5,620	7.0%
	B&W	\$750	\$131		\$5,620	2.3%
1965	Color	\$959	\$356	4.9%	\$6,957	5.1%
	B&W	\$890	\$106		\$6,957	1.5%
1970	Color	\$1,684	\$349	35.7%	\$9,867	3.5%
	B&W	\$412	\$88		\$9,867	0.9%
1975	Color	\$2,212	\$341	68.4%	\$13,719	2.5%
	B&W	\$416	\$84		\$13,719	0.6%
1980	Color	\$4,004	\$367	83.0%	\$21,023	1.7%
	B&W	\$588	\$88		\$21,023	0.4%
1985	Color	\$5,522	\$328	91.0%	\$27,735	1.2%
	B&W	\$309	\$84		\$27,735	0.3%
1990	Color	\$6,197	\$304	96.0%	\$35,353	0.9%
	B&W	\$99	\$70		\$35,353	0.2%
1995	Color	\$6,798	\$293	97.0%	\$40,611	0.7%
	B&W	\$34	\$71		\$40,611	0.2%
2000	Digital	\$1,422	\$2,275		\$50,732	4.5%
	Color	\$6,140	\$254	98.0%	\$50,732	0.5%
	B&W	\$15	\$57		\$50,732	0.1%
2005	Digital	\$15,563	\$1,369	15.0%	\$56,194	2.4%
	Color	\$2,790	\$165	98.0%	\$56,194	0.3%
	B&W	\$4	\$32		\$56,194	0.1%
2006	Digital	\$23,380	\$995	26.0%	\$58,407	1.7%
	Color	\$1,000	\$114	98.0%	\$58,407	0.2%
	B&W	\$3	\$27		\$58,407	0.0%
2007	Digital	\$25,184	\$954	43.0%	\$61,335	1.6%
	Color	\$115	\$99	98.0%	\$61,335	0.2%
	B&W	\$1	\$23		\$61,335	0.0%
2008	Digital	\$27,831	\$854	56.0%	N/A	

three and half had only one.

Now more than half of U.S. households already own a digital TV, too. Sales of high-definition models are growing faster than for other gadgets.

Watching the small screen remains in the top three leisure activities, second after reading and higher than spending time with family. Even when the economy began to falter early last year, Con-

gress dropped \$600 into mailboxes with encouragement to throw a little stimulus at the latest widescreen model.

The switch from analog television signals to digital transmissions in February 2009 has led to some of the new purchases.

"With the transition to digital television on Feb. 17, 2009, lower HDTV prices and an increased awareness of the benefits of high

definition, many consumers are deciding to upgrade their televisions," said Chris Ely, a CEA senior analyst.

As options get fancier, the screens get bigger and price tags add digits, Americans are spending about the same or less of their total household income on the tube.

The most expensive sets, in percentage of income, were sold in the late 1940s and 1950s when a televi-

sion cost between 4 percent and 11 percent of the average family income. In 1948, when commercial television really took off, the average TV cost about \$230, or 7 percent of income, for a family who wanted to watch any of Chicago's four stations.

Price is relative

Prices peak at the introduction of new technology then begin to fall. New color sets in 1954 cost about 11 percent of a family's income but fell to less than 1 percent when new digital TVs emerged in 1988. The new digitals cost almost 7 percent of a year's salary, according to the Consumer Electronics Association.

The bad economy is slowing sales but increasing value for anyone looking to buy a mid- to high-level television, said David Wexler, co-owner of The Little Guys Home Electronics in Glenwood.

Prices on digital sets have dropped 40 to 60 percent during the last year, Wexler said. And since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, people are spending more of their money to stay in so they want better quality televisions the whole family can watch. His best-selling TVs are flat-screen home models between 50 and 60 inches in diameter that have super high-resolution screens. They retail between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

Family time no more

One reason why homes have multiple sets is to limit fighting over shows, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation study about children's watching habits.

Families used to gather around a television show to watch, but now about half of Americans watch alone or without their children.

"The television screen is a time-honored way to become exiled from your actual circumstance into the fantasia of what's being depicted," said Eugene Halton, a sociology professor at the University of Notre Dame. "The purpose of commercial television is to hook you on the idea that the desire for something and the purchase of something can confer an identity on you."

"I'm not against television per se, but it is a seductive entity that can lure us away from ourselves," Halton continued. "Real relationships require paying attention. It's like they're free, and all you have to pay is the attention to them."

For Fredo Cruz and the millions of others forking over thousands for a new TV, the big flat screen and high definition are seductive enough.

Lauren FitzPatrick can be reached at lfitzpatrick@southtownstar.com or (708) 802-8832.