

Sling Media Slingbox (first look)

Contributed by Ricki Lee

Stuck in a hotel room in Toledo, Ohio? Are programs piling up on your DVR because you have no time for TV? Did you forget to record a special television event before leaving home? Want to watch the local news from back home? Sling Media, a newcomer in the battle for a share of the digital living room, announced a strategic investment from Hearst Corporation at DEMO in Phoenix this week. The Slingbox, announced at CES and due out in April, plugs into your set-top-box and rebroadcasts to any computer in your home or to anywhere on the internet, even to your PDA or web-enabled cellphone. The product is remotely upgradeable, so as more remote devices are added, the drivers and codecs can be downloaded via the Internet connection.

Based on Texas Instruments chip technologies, Slingbox communicates with your mobile computer or PDA, constantly adjusting the frame rate, compression and resolution to keep your signal streaming at the highest level of quality possible. Don't expect to stream a HDTV signal to a conference room wide LCD screen, but depending on your connection speed, you should be able to stream a fairly decent video signal, the best image possible constrained only by your bandwidth.

The Slingbox controls your TV/DVR/cable/satellite box via an external IR transmitter, and will ship with built-in controls for 97% of all media signal/storage devices. On your laptop in your hotel room, you will click on a graphical version of your remote control side-by-side with your video signal -- it can't get any easier than that.

Advantages: Slingbox is a hardware-only solution costing \$249 with no monthly service fee, compared to the PC-based solution from Orb Networks which operates on a service model costing \$10 per month. The Slingbox is small, just big enough for all of the inputs on the back, and is a stackable design, so we should anticipate other products from Sling Media in this form factor.

Drawbacks: The Slingbox includes only one input signal, compared to the \$800 SkipJam iMedia Center which serves input from multiple devices. In most installations, Slingbox monopolizes the DVR and/or set-top-box, leaving your entire home video entertainment system unavailable for other family members while you are accessing it remotely. The media stream is currently delivered as Windows Media 9, although other codecs are part of the plan down the road.

Summary: At \$249, this product is a mid-level consumer electronics device, and it may face price barriers even in the early adopters market, although we expect the price to drop over time. Also, if there is a big demand for "placeshifting" technologies, one wonders if DVR and STB manufacturers aren't far behind with an integrated Ethernet port on next-generation boxes.