

Your New Disposable Flat Panel HDTV

Updated Monday July 30, 2007-Now Includes Olevia HDTVs

Flat panel TV bargains abound these days. With prices dropping 30%-40% from 2006 to 2007 (confirmed this week by LG US CEO Michael Ahn) one can easily be tempted by the leader pricing of the “new brands” (called tier two and tier three by the consumer electronics industry) that undercut top panel maker prices by hundreds of dollars.

What the enticing, price driven TV commercials and their dealers don't tell you is that Westinghouse, Polaroid and other tier two and three set makers add costly charges *during* the one year warranty period and buyers may incur substantial service charges *after* their warranties expire. In fact, two companies surveyed don't support service *at all* after the one-year warranty expires!

Polaroid's HDTVs, which sell mainly through Circuit City, would seem to be bargain-priced compared to the “name brand” competitors. Polaroid's 1080p 42” LCD Model number PLD 4241TLXB, for example, sells for \$1149.99 at Circuit City, while Toshiba's 42HL167 goes for \$1699.99.

The Polaroid set seems like a good deal until you find out what the Circuit City and Polaroid websites fail to disclose, which is that Polaroid HDTVs *cannot be repaired* after the warranty period expires!

The HD Guru visited his local Circuit City and asked the salesman what to do if a Polaroid required out of warranty service. He didn't know. The next day the HD Guru called Circuit City's customer service (CS) department. The representative did not have a clue about either in or out of warranty service for Polaroid flat panels!

The HD Guru later contacted Polaroid customer service. A representative informed him that its HDTVs carry a one-year on-site warranty. Fine. But what about parts and service for *out of warranty* service? Incredibly, the customer service rep replied “there are no out of warranty repairs available, you are basically on you own,” adding that Polaroid does not offer any out of warranty support (including parts), at its US headquarters or through independent TV repair shops.

With no parts and no authorized “out of warranty service available”, what you basically get when you buy a Polaroid is a disposable HDTV— think paper towel. When the warranty expires, if the set breaks, it's ready for the town dump.

You can always buy an extended warranty from Circuit City, but that subtracts a substantial portion of the savings gained by buying an off brand TV in the first place. The HD Guru wonders how an extended warranty will be honored since Polaroid does not have any system to sell parts to servicers.

Next up, Vizio HDTVs. Here is what appears on its website, with bold added by the HD Guru.

”Service Labor

During the one (1) year warranty period, VIZIO will provide, when needed, service labor to repair a manufacturing defect at its designated service center. To obtain warranty service in the United States, you must first contact VIZIO Technical Support via email at techsupport@VIZIO.com or via phone at (949) 428-2525. The determination of service will be made by VIZIO. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR UNIT TO VIZIO WITHOUT PRIOR AUTHORIZATION.

Service

*During the one (1) year warranty period, VIZIO will, at its option and sole discretion, repair or replace defective parts, which may be new or remanufactured, including replacement of the entire unit. **The Customer will be required to ship the product to the service center indicated by VIZIO when the return authorization is provided. The Customer is responsible for all transportation charges to the service center. VIZIO is not responsible for the de-installation or re-installation of the product.***

Packaging and Shipping Instruction

When shipping the product to an authorized VIZIO service facility, the original carton box and packing material, or an equivalent as designated by VIZIO, must be utilized.”

According to Vizio, all TVs 37” and larger must go by truck to California. Fed Ex Ground from NY to Vizio in Irvine, CA is \$88.95 for its 42” LCD TV and \$108.95 for its 50” plasma. You threw out the TVs packing carton? If you are in the warranty period, it’s no problem, Vizio will ship you a new cardboard box at no charge (according to its CS rep).

If the Vizio flat screen breaks after the one-year warranty expires is where it gets expensive. The prices are shocking.

For any Vizio 42” LCD, the carton and packing material with shipping is \$300. Its out of warranty service is at a “Flat Rate” of \$300 parts + \$140 labor. Outbound shipping (FED EX ground) to Vizio cost \$89. For return freight, Vizio charges \$250 bringing the total cost of an out of warranty repair cost a staggering \$1079. The current cost of a new Vizio 42” LCD at Circuit City is \$1099. Think of it, twenty bucks more and you get a brand new disposable TV with a new one-year warranty. What a deal!

Insignia

Insignia is Best Buy’s “house brand.” It offers a line of HDTVs up to 42”. According to Best Buy salesmen and the Insignia website (<http://www.insignia-products.com/t-WarrantyInformationEnglish.aspx>) if an Insignia TV needs repair, you must bring it into the store where it was purchased in its “*original packaging or packaging affording an equal degree of protection*”. Hauling a 92 pound 42” plasma television in its factory

carton is quite a hassle probably requiring a large SUV, pickup truck or van. The Best Buy salesmen also said that after the factory one year warranty expires, Best Buy will not repair Insignia brand televisions, but if the two hundred dollar Best Buy extended warranty is purchased with the television, Best Buy will provide in-home service.

Westinghouse

If the set is purchased from Best Buy it must be returned to the store for warranty service regardless of the size of the TV, according to the Westinghouse customer service department. If purchased elsewhere, Westinghouse customer service must be called to determine if the set is in need of factory service. Westinghouse will issue a return authorization if they determine factory services is needed and it will pay the freight both ways if the TV was purchased within the last 90 days. From 90 days to the end of the one-year warranty, the consumer must pay the return freight and supply the original packaging or a suitable equivalent. Westinghouse does not sell replacement cartons and packing. Out of warranty service is available locally in select markets according to its customer service department. If there is no local factory authorized servicer in your area, the set owner must pay the freight both ways and the cost of repair parts and labor, which will be determined after Westinghouse receives and examines the malfunctioning television.

Olevia

Olevia's limited customer service hours (7:00 am- 6:00 pm Pacific time) and broken links on its website regarding its warranty rules made it difficult to obtain information on its policies. Furthermore, its warranties are the most complicated the HD Guru™ has encountered. If an Olevia HDTV requires repair within the one year warranty period, the additional costs and services incurred will depend on how long you owned the set its screen size. Here is its warranty program obtained from an Olevia customer service representative.

<37" screen size – customer pays return freight from day one. Return shipping to Olevia is \$55 for 32" HDTV and paid to Olevia when obtaining return authorization.

37" and larger- up to 45 days old Olevia will pay return freight to its California headquarters and replace the broken television with a new unit.

After 45 days the customer pays the return freight at a rate of \$150 for its 37" models and \$225 for its 42" HDTV. Olevia will replace the defective television with a rebuilt unit (as in another set that was defective and repaired) This "no repair" just replace with a refurbished set applies to all Olevia HDTVs regardless of model or size according to its customer service department. Olevia will pre-ship the refurbered TV to you and at the time of delivery, will allow you to use the same shipping carton to return your defective television.

The Olevia customer service rep said its 42" models have on-site inspection service, but it is only to send a technician over to your home to determine if the set is actually in need of repair, for example, to make sure the power cord is connected. If the tech determines the set is broken, Olevia will ship a replacement refurbished TV after the shipping is paid.

For sets out of warranty repairs, you would obtain a return authorization, and ship at your expense the broken TV back to Olevia for a repair estimate. If you need a shipping carton, Olevia will ship you one for a very reasonable \$20.

Olevia also offers extended warranty service plans, however they will charge you return freight after the initial 45 days of ownership and replace your broken HDTV with a refurbished unit. Here are the prices of the plans (you must add on the return freight charges) i.e. \$225 for a 42" model which raises the cost of warranty to \$474 for its 5 series with three year extension of the one year factory warranty. Of course if the set requires a second replacement, you would have to shell out another \$225 for shipping.

3 Series

All Parts & Labor/ Replacement (including LCD Panel)
2 Years Total/4 Years Total)

332 \$119 order \$149 order
337 \$159 order \$189 order
342 \$189 order \$219 order

5 Series

All Parts & Labor/ Replacement (including LCD Panel)
2 Years Total/4 Years Total

532 \$149 order \$169 order
537 \$189 order \$219 order
540 \$199 order \$249 order
542 \$199 order \$249 order

Name Brand HDTV Service

All the top name brands including Panasonic, Sony, Hitachi Samsung, Philips, LG, Mitsubishi, Sharp and Toshiba etc. have in-home factory authorized warranty service for their larger size TVs (usually 32" and up). Out of warranty service is no problem. All the major name brand TV companies have vast parts supplies and a nationwide network of factory authorized servicers. The latest trend, started by Panasonic is "concierge" service. If a Panasonic plasma is taken out of the home for service, Panasonic will provide a loaner plasma TV until the set is returned. This extra service is free; set purchasers only need to register with Panasonic.

Bottom line: the top tier TV companies invest in the future, spending collectively many tens of millions of dollars to keep their customers coming back to them. The “new brands” look for the sale today and do not have policies that will retain customers. With better warranties and service, the top brands have an incentive to build higher quality more reliable HDTVs.

Make sure you check out the warranty and after warranty service of the brand of HDTV you are considering, or you may end up spending more money sooner than you anticipate.

Copyright 2007 HD Guru TM All Rights Reserved