

Craig Crossman's Computer Column
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Over the years, I've seen them come and go. I'm talking about those set-top boxes for your television that give you access to the Internet. And while they met with varying degrees of success, most of them just weren't a hit with consumers.

Still, companies continue to try and find that magic combination of hardware and software that will finally bring the Internet into the home without the need of a personal computer.

The latest offering up to bat looks like it may have a good chance of making it for one really good reason. It's made by Microsoft.

Now I'm not saying that anything made by Microsoft is a success. The recycle bin is stuffed with many of the company's products that didn't make it. But the MSN TV 2 Internet and Media Player is a second-generation box that has learned from so many of the mistakes inherent in its predecessors. And while this still may not be TV Internet nirvana, I believe they are on the right path with this unit.

Based upon the popular MSN service, the MSN TV 2 box connects to your TV set via composite or S-Video connections. The Internet connection can be made via the unit's faster broadband Ethernet port or its slower standard dialup connection. Two additional USB ports are there for additional peripherals such as a printer. The MSN TV 2 can also be hooked up into an existing local area network in your home or office.

From the MSN TV home page, users have access to headline news and can search the Web. Additional features include accessing photos, video, music, Instant Messages, chat rooms, MSN channels, basically just about anything you can do with the MSN service using a computer.

Since you are accessing the MSN services via the box's proprietary system, everything is formatted to be viewed on an average TV set which typically has a much lower resolution than a computer monitor. However even though the pages are specially formatted to accommodate a TV screen, a Resize Page button next to the spacebar lets you observe a website as it would appear on a computer's display. Five different sizes of text may also be selected. From what I could see, most anything I could view on MSN using a computer was available to me using the MSN TV 2 box.

The MSN TV 2 uses a 733 MHz Intel Celeron processor. And while that computing power may not be considered top of the line in the computer world, remember that the MSN TV 2 doesn't have most of the software overhead that's required by an ordinary PC so it can use the processor power more efficiently.

With that in mind, the box comes with 128 megabytes of memory along with an additional 64 megabytes of Flash memory that doesn't forget when the power is turned off. The box also uses the Windows CE operating system and offers Internet Explorer 6.0 technology along with a Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF document viewer.

Supported graphic formats include JPEG, GIF, BMP and PNG, which are the most popular image formats used online. Windows Media compatible video and audio clips are also supported.

The MSN TV 2 also includes a wireless keyboard and a TV-like handheld remote control. The MSN TV 2 sells for \$199. The monthly MSN service is \$9.95 a month if you have your own dial-up or broadband Internet Service Provider and \$21.95 a month for dial-up access.

The MSN TV 2 is available through several national retailers such as Best Buy, Circuit City, CompUSA, online at Amazon.com, or directly from MSN via msntv.com.

It goes without saying that these kinds of set-top boxes still can't rival the functionality found in a personal computer. But then again, the MSN TV 2 sells for a fraction of the cost and its design really isn't intended to replace a computer. The MSN TV 2 provides a general, easy-to-access Internet experience without the clutter and expense of a personal computer sitting in your TV room. Go check one out. You may like what you see.