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Personal Tech

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WEAKNEES UPGRADE ALLOWS USERS TO SAVE MANY MORE HOURS OF TV

Add-on kit boosts TiVo program storage

By Sam Diaz
Mercury News

A few years ago, a couple of colleagues set out on a secret mission. They, like everyone else with a TiVo box in the living room, quickly realized that 40 hours wasn't enough to store all of the TV shows they were recording.

So they went underground, scanning newsgroup postings and Web sites for the cult-like TiVo people who would tell them how to get into the box and add an everyday hard drive.

Today, there's no reason to head into the dark alleys of the Web to upgrade a hard drive for a TiVo

digital video recorder. The crew over at Weaknees (www.weaknees.com) is only a click away.

The company, besides being an online TiVo reseller, is selling do-it-yourself hard-drive upgrade kits. And even if the idea of opening the box is so scary that you break out in hives, there's no reason to worry. The upgrade kits are easy to use.

Really easy — if you can follow directions. That's the key to a successful installation.

The kit itself is not flashy — there's a hard drive, some cables, the exact number of screws

you'll need and even a screwdriver with a special head that loosens the screws used on the casing of the TiVo box. You'll need to find your own Phillips-head screwdriver.

If you can follow step-by-step directions, written in simple English — with pictures, no less — you can upgrade from about 40 hours to as many as 320 hours of storage in less than a couple of hours. The instructions even include information on how to fix a rebooting glitch on a handful of DirecTV units — just in case.

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TiVo, which provides the software but doesn't manufacture recorders or upgrade hard drives, said it doesn't endorse the Weaknees product but has no problem with customers using Weaknees to add capacity to its drives.

Mostly, the company wants consumers to be aware of the consequences of altering a TiVo box — specifically, voiding the warranty.

Jeff Shapiro and Michael Adberg, former Southern California techies who started the business three years ago, are quick to point out that the labor warranty on TiVo boxes is only three months (parts are for one year).

Weaknees stands behind its kits for six months.

"Most of the problems we hear about are from techies who think they know more than we do," Shapiro said. "They don't follow directions."

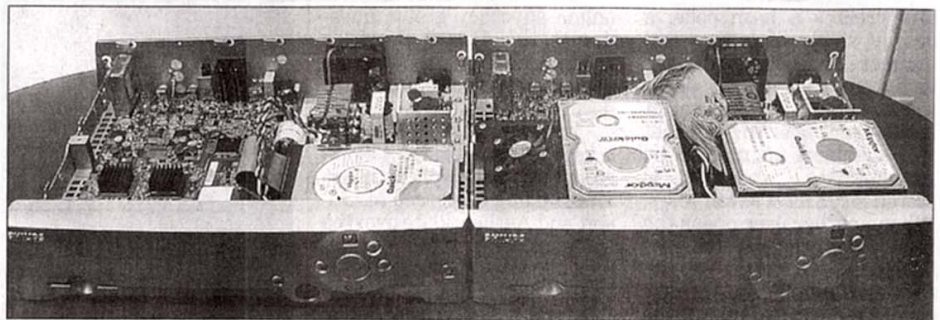
Some try to put the drive into a computer first to format it. Others try to reset the "jumpers," the physical settings on the hard drive itself.

"The drive, the jumpers, everything are all preset to work when you get the kit," he said.

In fact, they suggest not trying to put PC hard drives into a TiVo and vice versa.

Weaknees, like TiVo, only uses Maxtor's QuickView drives in its machines. The drives are optimized for digital video recorders such as TiVo. They run slower — 5,400 rpm instead of the 7,200 rpm or faster that many other hard drives on the market spin — so they generate less heat and are quieter.

That's important when the drive is housed in an enclosed box that is then housed in an en-



A TiVo before upgrade, left, allows users to save 40 hours of programming. After the Weaknees upgrade, right, users can save as much as 320 hours depending on the capacity of the hard drives.

closed space such as an entertainment center.

The drives, Shapiro said, eliminate pixel issues, frame-freezing and actually have a longer life than other drives.

Shapiro said the company has already upgraded more than 100,000 TiVo units — about 10 percent of the total TiVo boxes out there. Last year, sales were more than 400 percent over the year before, they said.

TiVo units — with a 40-gigabyte hard drive — are priced at about \$99 for DirecTV customers and \$199 for stand-alone units. There are new units available with larger capacity — as high as 320 gigabytes — but those can cost up to \$500.

What's good about the company's approach is the flexibility offered in upgrades so you won't have to buy a new box.

For \$139, you can add an 80-gigabyte drive to

your existing unit, increasing the recording capacity to more than 100 hours and keeping any programming you already have saved. For \$349, you can replace your existing drive with two 160-gigabyte drives — about \$150 cheaper than buying a new unit with the same capacity.

By comparison, a 160-gigabyte computer hard drive — not a QuickView drive — sells for about \$150 in retail stores.

And if you're really scared of opening the TiVo box, you can always send it to Weaknees. For an extra \$50, the company will do the upgrade for you. But, really, save your \$50 and just do the upgrade yourself.

It's that easy.

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