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GADGETS

# TiVo Users Thinking Outside the Box

By EMILY CHASAN  
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
October 21, 2004; Page D4

Since TiVo Inc. sold its first digital video recorder seven years ago, couch potatoes around the world have been rejoicing. But for true TV junkies, the 40-hour storage capacity on TiVo's low-end models is nowhere near enough.

Now, a growing number of TiVo enthusiasts are "hacking" their machines to boost that capacity. Some are prying open their TiVo boxes and installing monstrous hard drives so that their machines hold up to 700 hours of programming. Others are paying online retailers up to \$2,000 to get souped-up TiVos.

John Venzon of Arcadia, Calif., became a TiVo hacker recently when he found that he lacked enough storage to tape the Olympics. His wife and daughter, both gymnasts, wanted to see every second of NBC's Athens coverage but his TiVo was filling up fast. "My daughter won't let us clear off the high-definition version until she's had a chance to watch it a couple of times," he said. And Mr. Venzon didn't want to delete his favorite television shows so his daughter could keep watching Carly Patterson's gold-medal winning gymnastics performance over and over again.

So Mr. Venzon paid \$380 for an upgrade kit from online retailer WeaKnees.com at the beginning of the Olympics. His TiVo now has 470 hours of standard programming capacity. "I couldn't get it installed fast enough," he said.

## ConsumerReports.org

See Consumer Reports' [buying guide](#) for TiVo and DVD recorders.

through newreleasesvideo.com, estimates that by now at least 10% of TiVo subscribers have hacked their models, and online upgraders say business is still growing. WeaKnees and its competitors have reported double-digit growth almost every month since they started selling upgrade kits. It says that during the Summer Olympics, sales increased nearly 30%, as TiVo users tried to record round-the-clock Olympics coverage.

TiVo itself isn't exactly sitting still either. One of its new Series2 model, introduced in February, has a capacity of up to 140 hours and retails for \$399. The company also continues to announce new features, like Tivo-to-Go, which allows users to take recorded TV on the road. But for some TiVo addicts, even that's not enough.

The growing thirst for storage capacity reflects the changing way that Americans are using their TiVos. The original appeal of the device was it allowed users to record shows while they weren't away or to zap away commercials. Now, many people are using the machines as a massive long-term storage device.

"We view our TiVo as a catalog," says Eric Silverman, a consultant

Bill Regnery, president of Hinsdale Upgrades, which sells TiVo upgrades

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COMPANIES

|                  |       |                    |
|------------------|-------|--------------------|
| TiVo Inc. (TIVO) |       | Dow Jones, Reuters |
| PRICE            | 6.51  |                    |
| CHANGE           | 0.08  |                    |
| U.S. dollars     | 10/20 |                    |

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in Los Angeles, who keeps everything from favorite movies to children's videos on his three TiVos. To address his worries that TiVo might record over his two-year-old daughter's favorite Sesame Street episode, Mr. Silverman spent nearly \$1,000 upgrading his devices. He now has over 900 hours of recording time.

Customers willing to do upgrades themselves can supercharge their TiVo for a lot less than that. A hard drive capable of storing 70 additional hours of TV can be purchased for as little as \$139.

But there a few things to keep in mind before you pry the back off your machine. For starters, unlike a personal computer, the power source in a TiVo is unshielded. This means you can still get a nasty shock even if it's unplugged. Second, directions for reprogramming TiVo's Linux-based operating system are even more complicated than furniture assembly and you might want to spend some time familiarizing yourself with the directions.

TiVo doesn't officially endorse or discourage the hacking practice, but it does caution consumers that opening the box voids the warranty.

Online message boards like [www.tivofaq.com](http://www.tivofaq.com) or [www.tivocommunity.com](http://www.tivocommunity.com) outline the step-by-step procedure for adding additional hard drives to your TiVo. For the coding and tinkering types, how-to books like "Hacking TiVo" by Jeff Keegan or "TiVo Hacks" by Raffi Krikorian explain how to upgrade TiVo's memory. They also provide directions on hooking up AOL Instant Messenger and Caller ID features so you can see who is messaging or calling on your screen. It's even possible to get a TiVo to read your e-mail out loud.

If this seems daunting, consider an upgrade kit. Online retailers sell pre-programmed hard drives -- you simply have to lift up the lid of the TiVo and screw in the new drive, just as you might install a light bulb. Ready-made upgrade kits like this typically range in price from \$139 to \$799. At least one online company is also offering upgraded hard drives for machines made by TiVo rivals, such as those from Digital Networks North America Inc., ReplayTV or Microsoft Corp.'s Ultimate TV.

Some online retailers offer services that will do the upgrade for an extra \$39 to \$79 when you send them your TiVo.

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