

Forget plug and play

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Tragedically, it happens every day in homes across America. The do it yourselfer jumps at a great deal on a flat screen TV. He — and it usually is a “he” — hauls it out of the big box store and takes it home, gleefully envisioning how amazing the Super Bowl is going to look on this baby.

It doesn't exactly fit in the space he'd imagined for it, but he scrunches it in and plugs it up. The power comes on. So far, so good.

Somehow, though, the picture doesn't look quite as vivid as it did in the store. He hits “stretch” on the TV remote and everyone on the screen immediately gains 25 pounds. Hmm. He pops in a DVD, but the image refuses to show up on the big old screen. The surround sound isn't surrounding him at all.

Ask an electronics expert to name the biggest mistake homeowners make when installing home theater systems and you get a predictable response.

“Installing their home theater systems.” Of course they want your business. But successfully integrating home theater components has become so complex, it's a tall order for a do it yourselfer, said Ray Lepper, president of Midlothian based Home Media. The days of plug and play are over.

“Most people really don't have the time to learn enough to be comfortable that they've gotten the most value out of the stuff they've bought,” Lepper said.

After unsuccessful consults with an electrician friend, the burglar alarm installation guy and somebody's brother-in-law, the desperate do it yourselfer frequently turns to a pro.

“I can't tell you how many times we get a call from someone to fix their system after they've tried to save money by designing and installing a system themselves,” said Graham Hickerson, owner of Sound & Image Design in Richmond.

“What makes it worse is they do this with equipment they

bought at ‘a great deal’ from the Internet or the big box stores. Many DIY consumers are not aware that cheaper generally means

the system will be much harder to operate and less reliable than a system designed and installed by a professional.

“They end up spending more time in mistakes than if they'd hired a professional to begin with.”

About 60 million HDTV sets have been sold in North America since 2000, according to DisplaySearch, a flat-panel display market research and consulting firm.

Many of those purchasers, frustrated by installation issues, have bailed out and returned the equipment. Big-box stores such as Circuit City won't release numbers, but Taylor Phillips, merchandising manager for fire-dog — a consumer electronics help service started by the chain in 2006 — said “the return rate on this stuff is high.”

Quinton Washington is a Geek Squad Installer (GSI, as he refers to himself) for Best Buy in Midlothian. The Geek Squad — like fire-dog, a consumer help service — has branches for computers and audio/video.

Washington has seen some big-time screw-ups making house calls for sick home theaters.

“The most common thing is they try to put the TV on the wall but they don't put the mounting on studs,” he said.



"Drywall won't hold it up."
He's seen beautiful hardwoods ruined because a do-it-yourselfer drilled holes to run speaker cabling under the floor. "I've seen people hook up every connection to the TV and not get it right," Washington said. "The DVD plays and there's sound coming through — but it's the cable sound coming through."
In fairness, he said he also has seen some tech hobbyists do a pretty good job installing their home theaters. "The wires may look a mess, but it was right," he said. "Some people have the passion, but others are scared to touch it because they're scared they'll mess up something."

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Unsnarl TV wire mess

Oh, what a tangled web we weave

Just look behind our home entertainment centers. A horrifying rat's nest of cords and cables sprouts from widescreen TVs, DVD players, VCRs, CD systems and speakers.

What's a consumer to do? Here are some cord control tips.

■ Buy specialized furniture for home theater components. You'll find holes, tubes, drawers and other devices for safely organizing and hiding cords and cables.

La Difference, for example, car-

ries BDI home theater furniture that incorporates what the company calls "wire management." It's the routing of the cabling, it's the organization of the cabling and the desire and effort to make it disappear," said BDI sales representative Steve Feldman.

■ Treat cables gently. If cabling is bent, crushed, or — heaven, for bid — stapled beneath carpeting, the signal will be impeded and the audio/video quality will be diminished. Never force a cable into a sharp, 90 degree angle. The kink will leave you with garbled pictures and sound.

■ Organize your cables by unplugging everything and separating cables. Decide where you want each component to go, and then begin neatly running the cables toward the surge protectors.

■ If you're setting up speakers around the room, consider running speaker wiring through the walls. It's more complicated, but it keeps the wires out of the way.

■ Consider using what techno geeks call a "surface raceway" system. Surface raceways are boxes resembling wall moldings that are designed to hide, organize and route low voltage communications wires. They're sold at electronic stores and online sites such as www.cableorganizer.com.

■ Electronics stores and online retailers sell inexpensive, low tech wire-organizing solutions. 3-M makes a cord bundler for \$3.99 that attaches to flat surfaces. Several companies make nylon cable tie kits containing multiple colors and sizes. Sources: BDI, cableorganizer.com, knowhownow.com.

Has this happened to you?

You set out to install your own home theater but you are left with:

- yards of cabling and multiple remote controls,
- a thick, multi lingual instruction manual that makes no sense even in your native tongue,
- a repair guy from the cable company who blames the TV manufacturer,
- an expert on the manufacturer's chat site who blames the cable provider;
- an angry spouse and disappointed kids



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