BUYING THE IDEAL TV

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The LG24LF4520 (Top), LG32LF5600 (Middle), and the Samsung UN32J5500 (Bottom) are all small screen TVs that deliver excellent picture quality and a good viewing angle for low prices.

$30 to $80 on a separate HDMI switcher. You may also want to think about a USB stick for playing songs and displaying photos stored on a flash drive, or a headphone jack for listening to late-night programs when your partner is trying to sleep.

What you get is a good deal: Expect to pay about $230 to $300 for a basic 32-inch set from a major brand and as little as $160 from a lesser-known manufacturer. A smaller set can be had for even less.

GO FRUGAL

You can get a great set of any size without spending a fortune, especially if you ignore some of the bells and whistles that drive up the price. In fact, the secret to choosing a budget TV isn’t deciding what you want, but what you’re willing to give up. Here are a few suggestions:

STAY IN THE SECOND DIMENSION. Three years ago, 3D was the rage. Now? Not so much. In fact, some manufacturers, including Vizio, don’t even offer 3D-capable sets. Unless you’re a die-hard 3D movie fan, skip the feature—and the 3D Blu-ray player. That will save you money on 3D glasses too.

BE FINE WITH FLAT. Curved screens are another trendy feature. Some people find them visually attractive. But our testing shows they do little to enhance picture quality. And when mounted, they don’t sit flat against the wall.

DON’T PAY A PREMIUM FOR PIXELS. Prices for UHD sets continue to drop, but we think most budget-conscious buyers would be just as happy with a 1080p TV. For one thing, viewers often have a hard time seeing the difference in picture detail, which UHD sets provide, from normal distances. You won’t find a lot of native 4K content, either. Many things about UHD sets are still being finalized (see “Before you Buy a UHD TV, Read This” on page 44), and they still command a hefty premium over regular HD TVs, although prices will almost certainly fall soon. For now, a top-performing 1080p set is still a smart choice for most people unless you’re buying a huge TV and have a huge budget.

SKIP THE “SMART” SET. If you want to keep your spending in check, prioritize picture quality over Internet connectivity. We like smart TVs that can stream video, but that can add $100 or more to the price. By contrast, a streaming media player provides similar functionality at a cost of about $35 to $100.

SAVE ON SPEED. Some sets have refresh rates of 120Hz to 240Hz, which can help reduce blurring motion during fast scenes. But for many viewers, especially those who don’t watch a lot of sports, a regular 60Hz set is good enough. Our tests have found that some 120Hz models perform no better than 60Hz sets. If you decide you simply can’t live without a fast refresh rate, check the motion-blur test scores in our Ratings and find a model judged at least Good Overall.

COUNTER YOUR INPUTS. Many budget TVs have only one or two HDMI inputs, which can be a major drawback if you have a lot of gear to connect, such as a cable box, Blu-ray player, streaming media player, and game console. We recommend that you choose a model with at least three HDMI inputs unless you’ll be connecting your devices to a home-theater receiver.

If your TV has average to poor sound quality, you can always consider investing in a soundbar. You can buy a good one for as little as $100 or as much as $1,000.

GO SMART

Perhaps you want all those fancy bells and whistles for your TV? If price is not important to you, not to worry! We’ve tested several brands of “Smart TVs” and have given our input on each. Because smart TVs can come with all sorts of features, it can be difficult for consumers to make a decision.

Like Cat videos and Kardashians, smart TVs seem to be everywhere. According to the market-monitoring firm Quixel Research, close to 60 percent of the TVs sold this year will be in that category, the first time sales of Internet TVs have outpaced those of unconnected sets.

All smart TVs can access online content, such as streaming video services like Amazon Prime and Netflix. Basic smart TVs may be limited to the most popular ones; others offer a wide assortment of apps. Many have full web browsers, and some more sophisticated TVs can respond to voice commands, make program recommendations, and let you view content on your smart phone.

There’s no single smart TV standard. Here’s a quick look at the options from our top brands:

WebOS 2.0, an operating system made by LG, is among our favorites. Its main menu features a row of colorful tiles arranged across the bottom of the home screen, so you can still see whatever you’re watching. An amusing animation gets you started, and the customizable home page lets you add, reorder, or delete app cards to match your preferences. The whole system is fast and responsive, and LG’s Nintendo Wii-like point and click Magic Remote is great.

Originally developed for smartphones and watches, Samsung’s Tizen system also has a row of colorful tiles arranged across the bottom. You can quickly access recently used apps and channels, search, or browse the Web. You need to touch the pointer button on Samsung’s own motion-activated point-and-click remote to engage the onscreen cursor, so you’re less likely to activate it accidentally.

Sony uses Android TV, successor to the failed Google TV. Compared with the sleeker smart TVs from LG and Samsung, Android TV seems complicated. The setup is clunky—you need a Google account—and firmware updates take longer than they do for the other TVs we tested. Also, you can’t reorder the menu so that favorite apps come first. On the plus side, the voice recognition performs well, and the system supports Google Cast for sending content from a phone or tablet.

Panasonic has tapped Mozilla’s Firefox as its smart TV’s operating system. A visual improvement over the older Viera Connect platform, this one works similarly, though the bubble-style icons for main activities are less complicated. The system has fewer total apps, but the main ones are there. We liked the univer-
sal search that includes streaming, live TV, and personal content.