

»» How to choose a home entertainment

RETAILER

Home entertainment systems can be expensive, and in today's tough economic climate, it's important that you get the best advice – advice that will suit your specific entertainment requirements. The question is this: how do you know who to trust with your hard-earned entertainment budget?

Broadly speaking, there are four places you can buy home entertainment gear: on-line; from mass retailers; from specialist stores; and from custom installation companies.

Again, broadly speaking, the difference between these four options is the level of advice, after-sales service and support you'll receive.

On-line is increasingly popular as it's easy, efficient, prices can be compared, and you don't have to fight your way through a shopping centre on a busy Saturday morning. As on-line retailers often don't have staff or expensive rentals to pay, they may offer a better price than the other options mentioned.

On the downside, unless you know exactly what you want and how to install it, it's rare to find an on-line retailer who will recommend products to suit your specific requirements. What you buy may work perfectly for you, or it may not.

But what happens if the projector you bought isn't bright enough for you, or what if it breaks? Who do you complain to and where do you send the projector for repairs?

Exactly ...

Next on our list are the mass retailers. At a retailer you can usually have a look at the product you're interested in, sometimes see how it works, and there

will usually be a salesperson close by who can answer basic questions about the product. But don't expect lots of advice on advanced set-up.

In our projector example, you can ask if the projector will be bright enough to watch sport in a brightly lit room. If it doesn't work as expected, at least you can take it back to a physical store. If a repair is needed, you drop the projector off at the store and they'll ensure that it gets exchanged or repaired.

Specialist stores, if their staff members are worth their salt, will be able to answer all your questions, make suggestions about alternatives, demonstrate entertainment equipment in home-like environments, and offer advice

on installation. Most specialist shops will even offer to install and set up – sometimes for a small fee – your new entertainment gear.

As they are specialists, the gear they've sold you should be right for you and deliver the expected level of entertainment right out the box. Should something go wrong, they will also be able to collect from you and ensure repairs are done timeously.

Top of the list are custom installation companies.

Here the installers will come to you,

offer you advice on your exact requirements – they can see these because they're in your home – and do anything from installing a television to a whole home-distributed audio and video system, complete with lighting controls and automation. As these companies live and die by their service, this should be top notch.

Custom installers can sometimes offer in-home demos (as can some specialist stores), and if this is not possible because the gear is too expensive to lug around the country in the hope of a sale, they can usually arrange a demonstration at the distributors or another client's home.

While specialist stores and custom retailers' prices may be a little higher than on-line or mass stores, they do offer a professional service, better advice and support. And that, in our experience, is certainly worth it.

