



Digital Stream HD 3150 DTV Receiver

<BY RON GOLDBERG>

Since the inception of the DTV transition, over-the-air (OTA) reception via an antenna and ATSC tuner has been the most immediate way to get HDTV, and in some cases, the only way. With the cable and satellite providers offering more high-def programming each month, HD set-top boxes have become a niche category, but an increasingly important one. The Digital Stream HD 3150, by Pro Brand, International, is a simple but powerful DTV tuner that gives excellent bang for the buck.

DESCRIPTION

About the size of typical digital cable TV box, the HD 3150 is an unobtrusive and undemanding addition to the rack. It receives all ATSC formats and passes them through component video out, either in Y, Pb, Pr format or RGB with sync on green. Digital audio passes through either a coaxial or optical connection, and there are analog composite and S-video jacks. Outside of a 75-ohm F-type antenna connection, that's it. Even though this is a source component, the unit is simple enough to be looked at as an accessory.

The on-screen menu system is very friendly and simple to navigate, with clear, legible graphics and a refreshing absence of jargon. Setup was a breeze—two clicks and the unit quickly found all the channels in my reception area. Another click gave me a look at signal strength, and another let me edit my channel list. The unit doesn't pretend to be more than it is by acting like something complicated. Everything you need to do, you can do with minimum effort.

Other picture and sound options, like scaling, languages, menu opacity and the like are similarly intuitive. It's not like you need to make many of these adjustments in the day to day, but if you do, it's not a nightmare to enter the menu, as it is with all too many digital A/V components.

IMPRESSIONS

I recently moved to a new dwelling with a completely unobstructed, elevated reception path to the Empire State Building only 2 miles away. It's not like I need to bring out the big guns to receive HDTV over the air, and sure enough, the capable Zenith Silver Sensor indoor antenna was able to bring in just about everything in a snap.

The resulting picture and sound through the HD 3150 were as dramatic as any HD I've seen, and arguably better than what I've been getting from Cablevision. Of course with an OTA broadcast, nobody's making an additional decision of how many bits to allocate to already-compressed DTV programming, so theoretically, a set-top box should look as good or better than cable or satellite HD. But in reality, many receivers don't. It's not all about resolution and bits of course, it's also about the ability to pass clean signals, which not all units are able to do, particularly inexpensive ones like the Digital Stream. But the HD 3150 was able to impress on everything from clean EDTV to great representation of both 720p (Fox) and 1080i (CBS) material. I gotta tell ya, the playoffs never looked so good at my place!

CONCLUSION

In these days of increasing HD offerings from the cable and satellite providers, why do your customers need another set-top box? For one thing, they'd likely end up with more channels—the cable and satellite carriers don't necessarily carry everything there is to offer. For another, they'd definitely be getting all the HDTV quality they paid you for, which isn't always going to be the case from every cable and satellite provider for every DTV channel. And for some customers, a set-top box may be the only way to get HDTV.

The Digital Stream HD 3150 isn't fancy; there's no DVI connectivity, no hard disk or any other function, other than its ATSC tuning. But at only \$229, that's the point. Look at it this way—for less than \$300, including an antenna, you could offer your customers new channels that they aren't necessarily able to get anywhere else. For example, if your customer happens to like a TV show that gets multicast in DTV, this box and a PVR that will capture all the episodes could make someone disproportionately happy.

Granted, not everyone will have as much reception luck as I had with a \$25 indoor antenna. But if your customer needs more DTV (and maybe even HDTV) than their cable or satellite company is able to provide, the Digital Stream HD 3150 is a cost-effective option that's both simple and effective. **CR**

AT A GLANCE

Digital Stream HD 3150
DTV Receiver

\$229

Excellent user interface

Inexpensively priced

Simple operation

www.pbigroup.com