

Dish Network ViP722



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BOTTOM LINE:

The ViP722 DVR box from Dish Network is similar to last year's versatile, cutting-edge ViP622 model, but it sports a new look and offers increased storage. In a nutshell, this satellite set-top box is just more of an already good thing.

PROS:

Excellent interface. Large hard drive. Expandable storage via USB. Can record up to three programs simultaneously. Records and plays back MPEG-4 HD content.

CONS:

Offers fewer local HD channels than competitors such as DirectTV. Existing Dish Network customers need to pay \$200 to upgrade (before a \$100 mail-in rebate), while new customers receive the box free.

COMPANY:

Dish Network

EDITOR RATING: ●●●●● Very Good

By Brian K. Neal

The high-definition digital video recorder (DVR) has become an essential ingredient of today's home-entertainment setup, enjoying an important place alongside the mighty HDTV, which is, of course, the centerpiece. And no other manufacturer's HD DVRs have set the benchmark quite as high as those from Dish Network. The company's latest model, the ViP722, is pretty much the same as the versatile, cutting-edge ViP622 except for a new look and increased storage. All the features of its predecessor are here, including the ability to record simultaneously from two televisions, as well as receive or record MPEG-4 satellite broadcasts. Basically, it's even more of an already good thing.

The 11-pound ViP722 measures 16 by 13 by 3.5 inches—roughly the same dimensions as the TiVo HD—and the black finish should work well with most entertainment setups, though the silver remote controls complement the previous ViP622 model better.

The ViP722 offers plenty of connections and flexibility. Using what Dish Network refers to as "Dual Mode," the ViP722 can feed separate signals to two televisions at once. This handy feature can't be found in competing models, such as the [TiVo Series3](#) or [TiVo HD](#). The TV1 function offers a variety of connection options, including component, HDMI, S-Video, and composite, with analog stereo and optical digital for audio. TV2 is restricted to standard definition (composite) and analog audio only. This makes sense, since a second television likely resides in a bedroom where you're less likely to have a full surround-sound system.

To help you manage two TVs, the ViP722 comes with two well-designed remotes that fit pleasingly in your palm and are comfortable to hold. Buttons are large, with easy-to-read decals, and are thoughtfully aligned into three main groups. The (top) blue section is used for accessing menus and channel browsing, the middle (multicolored) group handles the ViP722's DVR playback and record functions, and the bottom (gray) area serves as the numeric keypad. Though they look the same except for the color of the decal below the keypad, there is a difference between the two remotes: remote 1 uses short-range IR signals to communicate with the ViP722, while remote 2 relies on RF for further distances.

One of the most critical aspects of the design of any DVR is the user interface, and the ViP722's menu system is top-notch. It is virtually unmatched for ease of use by any competing DVR, including the solid DirecTV HR20. The well-organized and streamlined Electronic Program Guide (EPG) lets you select among three text sizes and offers a preview window, a programming summary with runtime, and a full ten days of programming information. A virtual on-screen keyboard lets you enter additional information when required and offers an alternative to using the remote control within the search function. Like its predecessor, the ViP722 lets you create and customize up to four personalized listings of your favorite channels, complementing the three defaults: all channels, all subscribed-to channels, and all HD channels.

The rear panel also hosts an Ethernet port, a telephone jack that engages on-screen caller ID, a USB port for additional storage, and an ATSC antenna for grabbing over-the-air HD signals. I like the fact that the ViP722 can record three programs at once; up to two HD (TV1, ATSC over-the-air) and one (TV2) standard. Even more impressive: I experienced no lag or interruptions when recording three programs simultaneously during testing.

One caveat: Although Dish Network uses an advanced, high-compression technique, MPEG-4 AVC, which lets the ViP722 receive and record high-definition MPEG-4 broadcasts via satellite, its HD offerings lag behind those of competitors such as DirecTV, especially its local HD programming. Still, it already has 75 HD channels, and the company says it will gradually add more local HD content over time; it aims to have more than 100 HD channels by year's end.

A big advantage of the ViP722 over other HD DVRs is its large storage capacity. The internal 500GB hard drive can save up to 350 hours of standard-definition content and over 55 hours of HD programming. This is a nice bump compared with the ViP622, which holds 200 hours of standard-def and 35 hours high-def content, and it's almost double the capacity of the TiVo Series3 250GB drive, which holds 32 hours of HD content. The ViP722 further one-ups the TiVo Series3 with the option to increase storage capacity via USB (for a one-time fee of \$40). Attaching external hard drives wasn't a problem: I didn't run into any compatibility issues with my 200GB Maxtor drive or a 320GB one from Western Digital. Keep in mind, though, that although the ViP722 has both a front and rear USB port, using two external drives at once is a no-go. Only one drive can function at a time.

Overall, the Dish Network ViP722 is a robust, well-executed HD DVR with a feature set that's leagues ahead of the competition. My only quibble: Pricing for this box is confusing to say the least. New customers will receive the ViP722, along with HD programming for the first six months, free. After six months, HD programming is \$20 a month and there's a monthly DVR service fee of \$5.98. Existing customers who want to upgrade will have to pay \$200 for the box (they can get back \$100 with a mail-in rebate). Still, with multiple TV connectivity, expandable storage, and a well-rounded interface, the ViP722 is the HD DVR to beat, and thus it's our Editors' Choice for best DVR.