

Get the Most Out of Your DVD Recorder

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I admit it: I'm a former tape-a-holic. When I began using a VCR some 20 years ago (I ended up teaching Mom and Dad how to program the darn thing back then), I got hooked on the idea of creating my own video library, replete with everything from "Star Trek" episodes to gymnastics competitions.

Recently, however, I stopped recording video on tape and switched to DVD--and I haven't looked back. But after using several DVD recorders, I've identified some quirks and frustrations that are specific to frequent users like myself. Recording to DVD is very different from recording to tape; you encounter new types of hassles ranging from pesky so-called disc preparation times to annoying delays in ejecting discs and the challenge of creating visually appealing menus. The tips that follow are geared towards hardcore videophiles (you know who you are), but they're also applicable to the most casual user.

1. Choosing the Best Recorder for TV

If you've already bought your DVD recorder, skip to tip 2. But if you haven't, be prepared to be confused by a torrent of acronyms and options. DVD+R, DVD+RW, DVD-R, DVD-RW, DVD-RAM, EPGs ... and you thought buying an HDTV would be confusing.

When you walk into a store, chances are you won't be able to tell the differences between the slim DVD recorders gracing the shelves--at least, not at a glance. On the outside, they look virtually identical. And the only additional information you might get from the price tag or label is what format the recorder supports and whether it has a hard drive.

Don't stress so much about the formats. No single manufacturer supports all of the formats available; a couple of makers come close (Lite-On, Sony), supporting all but DVD-RAM. The - and + formats are quite similar, and either will get the recording job done.

I've personally observed that the - format discs tend to take longer to initialize and finalize. By longer, I'm talking about anywhere from 5 to 120 seconds, depending upon the unit--enough to be incredibly annoying when you're sitting in front of the TV, your finger eagerly hovering over the record button to start a recording, or the eject button so you can swap discs without missing any action.

If your goal is to record a lot of TV shows, then I can't recommend highly enough a DVD recorder with integrated TiVo service. Humax, Pioneer, and Toshiba all offer such recorders, which combine a hard drive of 80GB or greater with a DVD burner, and, of course, the TiVo service. The full-blown TiVo service costs extra (\$299 for the lifetime of the unit, on top of the cost of the recorder) and adds two-week's worth of program guides, a season-pass feature that records all episodes of a show so you never miss your favorites, and artificial intelligence that finds and records programs you might enjoy. (A free limited version of TiVo's software that downloads electronic programming information for the next three days is integrated into these units at no added cost.)

I don't make this recommendation just because of TiVo's personalized recording features and friendly graphical interface. The reason I suggest going this route is that these recorders have an amazing capacity to automatically create navigational menus. All of the program data in TiVo's electronic program guide--as well as TiVo's visual menu navigation structure--conveniently transfers over to any disc you burn.

DVD recorders are typically limited in what they can do to label menus. When you record a disc, you end up with a generically labeled index, with thumbnails for each recording or "title" on the disc, and boring and uninformative labels like "Title 01" (with, perhaps, the time and date added for good measure). TiVo-enabled recorders, in contrast, provide disc menus with the series name, episode title, and even a program summary as well as the date and time of the recording. If you're recording to cheap write-once media, this feature is invaluable. If you're recording to rewritable media--which means you could conceivably edit the menu titles at some point--this capability is still a huge time-saver.

Avid videophiles who don't want to spring for TiVo should look for a DVD set-top unit with a high-capacity hard drive of 80GB or more and high-speed dubbing of at least 8X. So far, I've seen only one recorder with both high-speed dubbing capability and a high-capacity hard drive, but I imagine that more such units will be forthcoming--eventually.

Beware of units that bill themselves as having "high-speed" dubbing: In most cases, the manufacturer is using the term to denote recording speeds of 2X or 4X from the hard drive to DVD. Furthermore, some vendors are coming up with absurd-sounding dubbing speeds--for example, 32X, a number they derive based on how many hours' worth of recordings you can fit on a disc (8 hours at the lowest-quality recording mode), and the speed of the burner (4X in my example).

Where to start your search? I recommend browsing PC World's latest "Top 10 DVD Drives" chart:

<http://www.pcworld.com/reviews/article/0,aid,118249,tk,box,00.asp>

2. Allow Extra Time

If you're preparing to record a program, budget a few extra minutes to get the unit ready. Believe me, the seconds add up--as I learned during my recording marathon of the Athens Olympiad. You need to factor in up to 30 seconds for the recorder to boot, about 10 to 20 seconds for the disc to spin up, and at least another 30 to 45 seconds for the recorder to prepare the disc for recording (your unit might say "initialize" or "format"). That's all before you can hit Record.

And when you're through recording, expect to wait 30 to 60 seconds to regain control of the recorder after you hit Stop. With some models, the delay occurs after you hit Eject. Either way, that delay could mean you'll miss the beginning of the next gymnast's routine--and none of this takes into account disc finalization, which can take another 30 seconds to 3 minutes, depending upon the disc's format and how much of it you've used.

3. Finalize, Finalize, Finalize

Disc finalization is the process that closes the disc so it can be read in other devices, such as a DVD player, DVD recorder, or DVD-ROM drive. It's also a process that bites. There, I've said it.

Finalization is the dirty little secret of DVD recorders: It's a time-consuming extra step that users of the venerable VCR don't expect. And it requires more effort than it should, due to poor menu design on DVD recorders. I've yet to see a recorder that makes this step truly easy--all of them bury it under a setup or menu item, and all of them require far too many clicks and layers considering this is a N-E-C-E-S-S-A-R-Y step for every write-once DVD-R or DVD+R you burn.

I recommend finalizing your disc as soon you're through recording. Due to quality issues, you'll likely record

only a maximum of 2 hours of television per disc, which means that no more than two weeks will pass between finalization sessions. This way, when you go back to a recorded disc, it will be ready to play in any DVD player--whether it's the \$30 Costco special in your bedroom or your laptop's DVD-ROM drive.

Caution: You might think you don't need to finalize if you don't have more than one DVD player or drive, and you plan on playing your DVD on your own recorder only. But what happens when, inevitably, you upgrade your recorder to a swankier, newer model? Or, even worse, when the model you're using now isn't working five years down the line? Then what? You'll be left with a library full of unreadable discs. Although you might be able to recover the raw video data from an unfinalized disc using a program like Infinadyne's CD/DVD Diagnostic, the process is tedious and time-consuming. Also, don't count on scavenging a backup unit off EBay in a few years: As I've learned, discs may not be interchangeable, even between two recorder decks bearing the same model number from the same manufacturer.

4. Don't Abuse Your Discs

It's easy to leave discs out of their cases, lying around or stacking up as you swap 'em out for a new one. But avoid that temptation--the dust will damage your discs, and you increase the chances of accidental scratches and scuffs.

Also, avoid leaving your recorded DVDs near a sunny window. The disc's dye layer is susceptible to light and heat; if either affects the disc, its data may become unreadable.

Finally, clean your discs carefully. Use a lint-free cloth, compressed air, or a liquid cleanser intended for use with DVD media. Dust and other airborne particles can scratch your disc, which could result in data loss. When cleaning with a lint-free cloth, stroke from the inside of the hub to the outside of the disc. Never use a circular motion from the inside out; and never use a tissue, paper towel, or other random rag.

For more on how to treat your discs, read
"Ten Tips for Durable DVDs":

<http://www.pcworld.com/howto/article/0,aid,113716,tk,box,00.asp>

5. Choose Your Media--and Labels--Wisely

A cheap spindle of media is tempting, but then you have to buy cases separately. And what cases to buy? Small plastic jewel cases? DVD movie-size cases? The combinations can be frustrating, at best.

Spindles are indeed affordable, but don't buy them without buying cases, too--and keep both stashed near your TV and DVD recorder setup, so you can easily grab a disc from the recorder and place it into its case. Otherwise, it's way too easy for stacks of discs to pile up--a no-no, as I note in tip 4.

Also, consider buying discs that come in oversized movie-style plastic cases. You'll pay a little more, but the convenience is worth it. Plus, you'll get a cardstock insert that you can use to create handwritten labels. If you get a high-speed dubbing unit, make sure you buy media that matches the recorder's speed.

If you do buy spindle media, keep in mind that the cases you buy in bulk may not have an insert on which you can scribble. If the case lack inserts, improvise with a piece of letter-size paper, folded over or cut up to fit accordingly. Spend a little more money, and you can get cardstock inserts.

There are a host of labeling software options out there to help you craft your labels. Read the following two "Burning Questions" columns for a comprehensive review of the subject:

"The Joy of Labeling":

<http://www.pcworld.com/reviews/article/0,aid,114423,tk,box,00.asp>

"Is Labeling Software Worth the Hassle?":

<http://www.pcworld.com/reviews/article/0,aid,114848,tk,box,00.asp>

But all of these options are going to require you to move your labeling operation over to the PC--something that may not work into your recording work flow.

Other PC-based labeling options include printable media that you can use with an inkjet printer. I'd stay away from adhesive labels, though: They're difficult to apply evenly, and could cause problems if the disc is poorly manufactured.

If you're trying to keep your labeling efforts nearer to your TV, I'd suggest using water-based pens to write on the discs, and on the label inserts, too, while you're at it. Another possibility: If your handwriting is barely better than chicken scrawl, then it's worth buying a battery-operated labeler, such as those offered by Brother or Casio. Both companies offer half-inch-wide labels that fit well along the spine of a DVD movie case.