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Banking On Wireless Speakers:[HOME EDITION]

David Colker. [Los Angeles Times](#). Los Angeles, Calif.: [Jul 5, 2004](#). pg. C.1

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Abstract (Article Summary)

In 40% of the homes Pioneer executives visited two years ago, consumers weren't getting the surround-sound effects because they weren't using the rear speakers as rear speakers.

Until the mid-1990s, surround sound at home was generally off limits to those who couldn't afford custom home theater installations. Then manufacturers came up with the idea of a home-theater-in-a-box system, which in its simplest form includes an amplifier, three front speakers, two rear speakers and a subwoofer. Many of the packages also include a DVD player as well as additional speakers.

The front speakers and subwoofer are connected to the main amplifier by wires, and there are also wires to carry sound from the receiver at the back of the room to the rear speakers. Both the amplifier and receiver need to be plugged into wall outlets to get power. Only the longest wires -- from the amplifier to the receiver -- are eliminated in a wireless setup.

Full Text (1205 words)

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Pioneer Electronics Inc. was in for a shock when it checked in on audiophiles who had bought home theater sound systems.

The systems, with front and rear speakers to re-create the enveloping soundscapes of movie theaters, had been flying off the shelves at prices as low as \$200. The market's potential growth seemed huge.

But in 40% of the homes Pioneer executives visited two years ago, consumers weren't getting the surround-sound effects because they weren't using the rear speakers as rear speakers.

"People were putting them on top of the front speakers, down on the floor in front," said Pioneer executive David Bales, "or not hooking them up at all."

The reason: unsightly speaker wires.

Now Pioneer and other consumer electronics manufacturers are trying to prevent wires from tripping up sales by introducing new wireless technologies to connect the rear speakers to the rest of the system.

It's important that manufacturers succeed. Sales of the systems in the U.S. jumped 29% last year to \$961 million but are projected to rise only 7.5% this year, according to EBrain Market Research.

Last summer, Royal Philips Electronics became the first major manufacturer to introduce a system with wireless rear speakers. Pioneer and Samsung Corp. debuted their systems this spring and Sony Corp. is planning to follow suit next month.

Analysts are watching closely. Jupiter Research, which covers consumer electronics for its clients, has launched a study titled "Wireless Speakers: Are They the Holy Grail?"

That might not be hyperbole. On a recent visit to a Circuit City store, Cam Currier of Pasadena was looking longingly at a traditional home theater sound system. A broadcast engineer for ABC radio, he could handle the complexities of electronics, but he wasn't about to buy one until he was assured the wiring problem was taken care of.

"Dealing with the wires at home is a 14-karat nightmare," said Currier, 59, who has done his share of drilling to accommodate home stereo wiring. "I've done the attic, I've done under the floor. I'm tired of it."

As for shopper Phil Romano, he has a surround-sound system for his San Marino home, but the wire issue prevented him from hooking up the rear speakers.

"If you are just starting out, if you're a teenager, it doesn't matter," said Romano, 49, who was in the store to check out the wireless system from Samsung. "But if you have a room all nice and furnished, you don't want to see the wires running across it."

The problem is especially acute for apartment and condominium dwellers who might be restricted from drilling into floors or ceilings, as the Pioneer executives found in their home visits. They said some consumers hid the wires with rugs or taped them to the floors so that they wouldn't trip over them.

Until the mid-1990s, surround sound at home was generally off limits to those who couldn't afford custom home theater installations. Then manufacturers came up with the idea of a home-theater-in-a-box system, which in its simplest form includes an amplifier, three front speakers, two rear speakers and a subwoofer. Many of the packages also include a DVD player as well as additional speakers.

The first systems were snapped up primarily by aficionados who weren't deterred by complicated hookups and inconvenient wires. Now that manufacturers are targeting the mass market, seemingly trivial issues like speaker wire can have a big effect on sales.

"Complexity is an absolute inhibitor for the consumer," Jupiter analyst Avi Greengart said.

Philips was the first major manufacturer to address the concerns of home theater enthusiasts like Currier and Romano. But its \$350 system, which includes a wireless receiver that feeds sound to the rear speakers, failed to garner much consumer interest.

Todd Richardson, manager of Philips' home entertainment products network group, believes part of the problem is the system's oomph -- at 300 watts, it's on the low end for home-theater-in-a-box systems.

But he also said that wireless speaker systems tended to run into problems in stores. "We use the term 'wireless,' but it's difficult to explain to customers because there are still wires," Richardson said.

The front speakers and subwoofer are connected to the main amplifier by wires, and there are also wires to carry sound from the receiver at the back of the room to the rear speakers. Both the amplifier and receiver need to be plugged into wall outlets to get power. Only the longest wires -- from the amplifier to the receiver -- are eliminated in a wireless setup.

Beyond that, each of the transmission technologies that manufacturers are using has potential drawbacks. The Philips system transmits on a 900-megahertz frequency band, which is also used by some cordless phones and other home devices that can cause interference. Pioneer's speakers use the 2.4-gigahertz frequency band, which is less susceptible to interference but can still run into trouble from microwave ovens.

"We put a very large disclaimer on the product," Pioneer's Bales said, adding that he was not aware of any complaints from its customers.

Samsung also uses a type of 2.4-GHz transmission scheme called Bluetooth that was developed for hand-held computers and other portable devices. Samsung executives said they fortified Bluetooth to carry high-quality sound with little chance of interference.

Sony is going with infrared technology, which is used in TV remote controls. Its main drawback is that it requires a line-of-sight connection to transmit sound. That means the rear receiver can't be hidden behind a couch. And if a person getting up for more popcorn blocks the signal, the sound will temporarily cut out from the rear speakers.

Then there's the price. Wireless speaker systems for home theaters cost about \$150 to \$200 more than their tethered counterparts.

Some customers say they'd be willing to pay the difference.

"All things being equal -- if the audio was as good as with a hard-wired system -- it would be worth the money," said Currier, the radio engineer.

That kind of enthusiasm makes manufacturers optimistic. Pioneer predicts that 35% of the home-theater-in-a-box systems it sells this year will come with wireless speakers, Bales said.

Sony is less sanguine. The company will begin selling wireless rear speaker systems in the U.S. this year and expects sales to be slow at first. But Phil Abram, head of audio/video marketing for Sony's U.S. operation, predicted that the market would pick up in coming years when "people become more familiar with the technology and its benefits, and the costs come down."

For Chris Kyriakakis, the era of wireless speakers can't come fast enough. As an associate professor and audio expert at USC's Integrated Media Systems Center, he's a true believer in surround sound. His system at home has 12 speakers, and all the wiring headaches that go with them.

"In the audio field, we talk about something called the SAF -- spousal approval factor," Kyriakakis said. "Wireless has it cornered, big time."

[Illustration]

Caption: GRAPHIC: The detangler; CREDIT: Perry Perez Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: STRINGS ATTACHED: Cam Currier of Pasadena checks out a traditional home theater sound system at a Circuit City store. "Dealing with the wires at home is a 14-karat nightmare," he said.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Al Seib Los Angeles Times

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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