HDTV's Acceptance Picks Up Pace

By ERIC A. TAUB

LOS ANGELES, March 30 — It was an easy target and got a big laugh. At last week's Academy Awards ceremonies, the host, Steve Martin, noted that the awards show was being broadcast in high-definition television, or HDTV, for the first time. "So I'd like to say a big hello to the three guys watching at Circuit City," he said.

Since its rollout in 1998, HDTV has tended for most people to be the video equivalent of a tree's falling in the forest with no one around to hear it. Digital sets have been costly and the availability of high-definition signals on cable has been skimpy. But, in fact, the technology — digital-quality television with a supersharp picture the shape of a movie screen — has started to catch on in measurable ways.

Although HDTV still presents consumers with a confusing set of shopping issues and can be difficult to install, the sets and attendant equipment have come down in price from the ridiculous ($10,000 or more, initially) to the merely expensive (now less than $1,000 at the entry level). And so, sales are beginning to expand beyond the cult of early adopters, although the number of households with HDTV sets remains only a fraction of the nation's television audience.

An estimated 4.9 million HDTV-capable sets have been sold in this country, but only about 640,000 have been purchased...
with a built-in tuner or add-on decoder box required for receiving an HDTV broadcast.

HDTV programming, meanwhile, is steadily moving beyond special-event status and becoming an increasingly regular part of the lineup on the leading broadcast networks, transmitted as digital simulcast feeds by the local affiliates that have the necessary equipment.

Among broadcasters, CBS and ABC have led the way. Back in October 1998, eight CBS affiliates carried the first widely available HDTV broadcast, the October 1998 launching of the space shuttle Discovery, with John Glenn aboard. The next month, ABC presented the movie "101 Dalmatians" in high definition, and in January 2000 broadcast the first Super Bowl in HDTV. Now, both networks offer all their prime-time scripted shows in the HDTV format, as well as many sporting events, including the current N.C.A.A. men's basketball tournament and next month's Masters golf tournament.

Indeed, because many people consider sporting events in HDTV to be perhaps the technology's most compelling application, enthusiasts and industry executives expect more households and sports bars to buy the sets now that ESPN has started its new HDTV channel. The service, called ESPN HD, had its debut tonight, carrying Major League Baseball's season opener between Texas and Anaheim.

ESPN HD plans to carry 100 professional baseball, basketball, hockey and football games live in the next year in the HDTV format, while "upconverting" all of ESPN's other programming to the technical equivalent of HDTV. ESPN is part of the Walt Disney Company.

"ESPN HD will be a tipping point in the transition to digital television," said Gary Shapiro, president of the Consumer Electronics Association, an industry trade group. "When consumers see a Randy Johnson fastball coming straight at them, or feel the reverberations of a power dunk by Shaq, they'll know what is so magical about high-definition TV."

And for CBS, a unit of Viacom, HDTV is part of the network's competitive strategy. "HDTV gives us the ability to differentiate ourselves," said Martin D. Franks, an executive vice president at CBS. "As good as 'C.S.I.' is in standard television, it's a different experience in HDTV."
HDTV is the highest quality of various types of digital television formats, but it is not the only one. In 1996, when the Federal Communications Commission mandated that the nation's over-the-air broadcasters begin a transition from the half-century-old analog format to a modern digital system, it did not specify that HDTV be the digital system of choice.

Besides HDTV, the data-compression techniques incorporated into the digital standard that the F.C.C. approved can enable broadcasters to divide the equivalent of a single conventional, or analog, channel into several standard-definition digital channels along with other data services.

To accommodate the industry's digital transition, the F.C.C. gave each television station a second channel, with the understanding that the old analog channel would be returned once the transition was complete, for the F.C.C. to auction off for other uses. The changeover was supposed to be finished in 2006, but virtually no one expects that deadline to be met. Supposedly all 1,309 of the nation's local commercial broadcast stations were to have begun transmitting a digital feed of their existing channels by last May. But even now, only 695 have done so, with the rest receiving waivers because of construction or other delays.