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GADGETS

Video Phone Puts You on TV

Device Uses Your Own Set To Make Calls, Send Images;
It's Not Quite `Star Trek'

The long effort to create a workable, simple, inexpensive video phone for consumers has taken another step forward. Now you can buy a simple gadget for \$150 that will let you see the person you're calling right on your TV screen. And it works over ordinary phone lines and with ordinary phones. No Internet connection or high-speed line is required.

This latest video-phone innovation comes from **Vialta** (www.vialta.com), a small Fremont, Calif., company that introduced its first video phone last summer. The product, the Vialta Beamer, was also simple and effective, and it also worked over regular phone lines. But it used a special flat panel screen that hooked into a regular phone. Because flat panels are expensive, that original Beamer cost about \$500 a pair, too costly for many budgets.

Now Vialta is releasing a sequel called Beamer TV. It uses a standard TV instead of the special screen, and that offers two big advantages. First, it costs a lot less — \$299.99 for a pair, sold in a twin-pack, or \$149.99 for a single device. Also, it allows whole families to more easily see, and participate in, a video call by simply gathering around the TV.

My assistant Katie Boehret and I got an early look at Beamer TV, and we liked what we saw — for the most part. The image quality isn't on par with the best video images. The picture can get jerky or fuzzy, depending on the quality of the phone connection, especially if people are moving. But it is good enough to be appreciated by friends or relatives whom you don't often see. If you're seeing a new baby, a distant grandparent, or a lover or spouse who's far away, you're unlikely to be too picky about video quality.

The Beamer TV consists of a thin, 7½-inch-wide box that sits atop your TV like a cable box. A small camera lens



*Beamer TV by Vialta Inc.
Price: \$299 for a pair;
\$149.99 for a single unit.*

that can rotate up and down peers out from the box's center. Four cords snake away from the Beamer TV's back side: a video cable that fits into your TV, a wall and two phone cords. One phone cord fits into the base of your phone while the other fits into your phone jack.

The device also comes with a remote control, which measures a bit longer than a credit card. The remote's round buttons — Start/Views, Snapshot, Detail and Movement — let you sit back and make image adjustments from afar. The only thing the remote does control is the angle of the camera lens. That must be adjusted manually.

To place a video call, you use any corded or cordless phone that has been connected to the Beamer, and dial just as you would normally for a plain old audio call. The other person must also have a Beamer TV, or the original flat-panel Beamer. Once the call is connected, the Beamer establishes its video connection.

Katie and I each took a Beamer TV to our homes, about 20 miles apart in the Washington, D.C., area. Both of us found setup quick and easy — the whole process took about five minutes. I called Katie, and after she answered, I touched the Start/Views button on my remote, and a beep sounded into my phone followed by a female voice telling me that Beamer was preparing the video for transmission. Though Katie couldn't hear the voice, both of our screens displayed progress bars moving from left to right. During this video preparation, neither party can hear the other, which might be frustrating for first-time users who aren't quite sure what's going on.

About 20 seconds later, I finally saw an image of myself in the top right, next to a message telling me to tell Katie to press Start/Views on her Beamer's remote. She did so, and suddenly each of our TVs displayed grainy images of the other person. It took a few seconds for the images to become clearer, and when the picture finished adjusting, image quality ranked somewhere between slides and choppy video. You can choose to see only the other person, only yourself, or both parties on your TV.

If you want privacy at any time during your conversation, you can press the remote's Snapshot button and send a still image that replaces the live feed. There are two other settings, called Detail and Movement. Detail sharpens the image, but makes it blurrier when the other person is moving. Movement does the opposite. When Katie was gesturing, I touched the Movement button a few times; when she was still, I pressed Detail. If the line quality drops below acceptable levels, Beamer TV alerts you by flashing the word "line" on the screen. To get a better picture, you can try redialing.

Bored by video-chatting with her boss, Katie placed a more interesting video call to her Boston-based sister, Allison, who also had a unit to test. Allison had trouble

setting it up because her phone jack is nowhere near her television. The two phone cords supplied by Vialta each measure 25 feet for such situations, but it was too short for Allison's apartment. After moving the Beamer TV to a friend's apartment Allison could chat with and see her sister.

Another complication plagued the sisters: Like a lot of young singles, neither had long distance set up on her land-line phone because each uses a cellphone for long distance calling. The Beamer TV doesn't work with cellphones. They used the friend's long-distance service to place the call, but you could also use one of the 10" dial around plans. We suspect that many others have grown dependent on cellular long distance and might not adjust well to the land-line long-distance plan necessary for using Beamer TV.

Katie also tested the device with a local friend, but had difficulty with the connection halfway through the conversation. A message appeared at the bottom of both TV screens saying that the line was adjusting, and for about 20 seconds neither person could hear the other. Vialta's handbook explains that this automatic adjustment is the Beamer's way of trying to improve the connection, and after the brief wait, Katie and her friend were chatting again.

Overall, we like Vialta's idea of incorporating your television into a videophone. The pictures aren't exactly Star Trek quality, but they get the job done.

—With reporting by Katherine B

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