

Chapter 1

Knowing the TiVo

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding how TiVo changes TV
- ▶ Understanding how TiVo changes its owner
- ▶ Understanding TiVo's limitations
- ▶ Recognizing TiVo's appearance

Until you've seen TiVo in action, you can't quite understand all the hubbub. Isn't a "TiVo" just a glorified VCR? Everybody already has a VCR; nothing new here, move along. Yet people aren't moving along. If they're not buying the thing, they're hearing other people talk about it.

Jay Leno and David Letterman talk about "TiVoing" favorite TV shows. The word "TiVo" pops up in newspapers and magazines with increasing frequency. And if you're unlucky enough to meet a TiVo owner at a party, it's time to toddle off to the bar: TiVo owners can't stop themselves from singing TiVo's praises. What's all the fuss about?

Much to the dismay of TiVo's marketing department, it's quite difficult to explain a TiVo in a few short words, or even a 30-second TV spot. To help clear things up, this entire chapter explains what TiVo does well, where it sometimes misses the mark, and just what the darn thing looks like, anyway.

Finally, you'll understand why TiVo owners (myself included) can't seem to stop raving about the darn things.

Pausing Live TV



Your friends take their seats, the show begins, and, a few minutes later, the pizza man rings the doorbell. Who misses the show to fetch the pizza? With TiVo, nobody misses anything. A press of the TiVo remote's pause button freezes the screen, flicker-free, until you return, pizza in hand.

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Pausing a live TV show certainly isn't TiVo's most-used feature, but it's probably the easiest to understand. Armchair philosophers, however, may ask, "How can TiVo *pause* the reality of a live TV show?"

It's easy. TiVo never really displays "live TV." TiVo constantly records whatever channel you're watching. Even when you watch "live" TV, you're actually seeing TiVo's recording, which appears onscreen about one second *after* the show reaches everybody else's TV screens.



- ✓ Pressing the Pause button merely freezes the display; TiVo continues to record the show in the background. Push the Pause button again, and TiVo starts playing its recording again, right where you left off.



- ✓ If you paused the show for three minutes, for example, your viewing of the show would extend to three minutes after the *real* show ended.
- ✓ After returning to watch a paused live TV show, most TiVo users actually *look forward* to the commercials. When the hucksters appear, press the remote's Fast-Forward button to skip quickly through the commercials, eventually catching up to "real time" — one second behind the show's actual broadcast.



- ✓ Chances are, the pizza delivery guy doesn't miss the show, either. His TiVo records it while he's working.
- ✓ If you don't return to the paused show within 30 minutes, you begin missing part of the show. After 30 minutes, TiVo starts playing the show from where it paused. If you think you'll be away for more than 30 minutes, and you *really* want to see all of the show, press the remote's Record button before standing up. TiVo courteously saves the rest of the show for you to watch at your leisure.
- ✓ After owning a TiVo, most people avoid watching live TV. There's just no more use for it. The TiVo's already recorded the good stuff, and you could be watching that, instead.

Controlling Your Own Instant Replays

Sports fans love watching an "Instant Replay." During a football game, for instance, the network's Instant Replay lets everybody see who dropped the ball, why, and who's now lying on top of it. TiVo borrows the power of Instant Replay from the networks and passes it into your own hands. You can see an Instant Replay of anything you're watching, any time you want.

What's the difference between a DVR, a PVR, and a TiVo?

Bobbing in the crowded Sea of Acronyms, the initials DVR stand for *Digital Video Recorder*. PVR stands for *Personal Video Recorder*. Both mean pretty much the same thing: a gadget that records television shows onto a hard drive — just like the ones used by computers — making recordings quick, easy, and much more accessible.

A TiVo is a special breed of DVR/PVR. It records shows onto a hard drive, but it also makes intelligent decisions, saving you a lot of grunt work. For example, TiVo offers things like a “Season Pass,” where it automatically seeks out and records all episodes of a TV show, regardless of when they air. Items placed in TiVo’s “WishList” — actors, directors, subjects, or titles — can be recorded automatically, whenever they air.

In short, TiVo is a DVR/PVR, but not all DVR/PVRs sport TiVo’s intelligent features. Some make you schedule recordings manually, for instance, by entering a show’s channel, date, and starting/ending times. TiVo handles those tasks automatically, requiring nothing more than a show’s name.

Some technologists pinpoint the difference between DVR and PVR to the machine’s IQ. A TiVo is a *Personal* Video Recorder, because it adjusts to your *personal* tastes by automatically recording your favorite shows. A *Digital* Video Recorder, by contrast, merely records shows onto a hard drive: You still need to tell the dumb thing what date, time and channel you want to record, just like a VCR.



When something exciting happens onscreen, push the TiVo remote’s “Instant Replay” button. TiVo instantly rewinds eight seconds and starts playing, letting you watch the past eight seconds again.

Didn’t jump back far enough? Push the Instant Replay button *twice* to jump back 16 seconds. If the action happens too fast to see what’s going on, push the Pause button, then push the Fast-Forward button to move through the sequence frame by frame.

Although I don’t watch much sports, I use Instant Replay after one of my wife’s loud belches to catch missed dialogue. It’s great for moving through explosions, frame by frame. Movie buffs will enjoy exploring intimate details of a director’s composition, figuring out exactly when they cut to a new scene and why.

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- ✓ Fans of movie “bloopers” love TiVo. If you’re watching “Titanic,” for instance, watch closely to see the guy with the digital watch get into the lifeboat. (The Titanic sank in 1912.)
- ✓ Instant Reply comes in handy when you return to a paused show. Watching the last eight seconds brings you right back into the action.
- ✓ You don’t miss any of your show by using Instant Replay, even when watching live TV. Pushing the button simply makes the show begin playing again eight seconds from the time you pushed it. (Each time you push the button, your show ends another eight seconds later.)

Putting Your Television to Work

TiVo works as your robotic television manager, constantly scanning upcoming show listings to separate your favorites from the trash. It juggles the recordings to avoid possible overlaps, and it saves the good stuff until you’re ready to watch it.

Simply put, TiVo makes *you* the boss of your television. You’re no longer at the mercy of the networks, their rigid scheduling, and their loud commercials. You no longer have to watch “whatever’s on” when you sit down. Your TiVo insulates you from the bad aspects of TV, catching only the good.

Why buy TiVo when I don’t watch TV?

It’s easy to see why so many people don’t watch TV. There’s rarely anything good to watch. Why buy a TiVo when there’s nothing to watch?

Look at it this way. Let’s say 99.9 percent of TV is awful, leaving just one or two thoughtful, intelligent shows. Most homes have at least 50 channels available. That means 1,200 hours of television programming flows unwatched through your home every day. If TiVo grabs just .1 percent, it’s still collecting at least an hour of good stuff every day.

Think about it. You’re bound to be interested in *something*. Tell TiVo about it. It doesn’t care if it’s on some obscure channel during the wee hours. Whenever *anything* flows by that meets your interests, TiVo grabs it.

Then, whenever you decide to watch TV, you’ll find something good waiting for you. TiVo found it, bagged it, and has it waiting for when you’re ready to watch it.

It's surprisingly easy how TiVo does this. You select names from a list, telling TiVo your favorite show titles, movie titles, actors, directors, or subjects. With a few pokes on the remote, you can even type in subjects like "parrots" or "James Bond." TiVo scours the show listings for the next two weeks, automatically scheduling and recording shows that match your interests.

TiVo immediately tunes to the right channel at the right time — unattended — and records your show. It repeats the process as often as needed to record whatever you want.

When you feel like watching TV, you choose from TiVo's list of recorded shows — shows you *know* you'll enjoy.

- ✓ I explain how to automatically record your favorite shows in Chapter 6.
- ✓ If a sneaky network bumps your favorite sitcom from Wednesday to Thursday for some reason, don't worry: TiVo still grabs it. It knows these things.
- ✓ If the network preempts your show because of a late-running ball game, TiVo grabs the late-running ball game. (Of course, everybody else also missed the show, so you don't feel so bad. TiVo will still catch your unwatched show when it repeats, though.)
- ✓ After awhile, the concept of watching live TV will seem foreign and outdated. You'll forget when your favorite shows air, because you no longer care: That's TiVo's job.
- ✓ If you arrive home 20 minutes after a favorite show started — and you've told TiVo to record it for you — you can watch the show as soon as you walk in the door. TiVo plays the show from its beginning for you, all the while continuing to record the rest of the show.
- ✓ TiVo substantially lowers your movie rental tab. Why rent a movie when your TV is filled with so many movies you already want to watch? It no longer matters that the good films aired at 4 a.m. — TiVo stayed awake to record them for you. (And you no longer must remember to put in a videotape; TiVo never needs them.)



Zippping Past the Commercials

TiVo's remote comes with Fast-Forward and Rewind buttons, just like the ones on a VCR's remote. Unlike a VCR and its slow and awkward tapes, TiVo records everything on its *hard drive* — just like the one inside a computer.

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» That makes it much faster to fast-forward through those intrusive bits of nonsense called commercials. Whenever a commercial begins, press TiVo's Fast-Forward button. When you spot your show playing on the screen, push the Play button. TiVo backs up a bit, and begins playing your show from when the commercials stopped.

- ✓ Skipping commercials often reduces a one-hour TV show to just 40 minutes. You don't even need commercials for bathroom breaks: Just pause the show when the need arises. Or when the phone rings. Or the baby cries. Or the cat wants inside. And outside. And inside again.
- ✓ You can still watch commercials, if you want, especially the funny ones during the Super Bowl. TiVo doesn't edit them out. It just lets you skip past them very, very quickly when you want. (With TiVo's three-speed Fast-Forward button, a 60-second commercial blasts past in a second or two.)
- ✓ The Fast-Forward button also works great for skipping the boring parts of movies, political debates, and talk shows. When watching Saturday Night Live, for instance, it's easy to zip ahead to the next sketch or musical guest.



My TiVo Spies on Me!

TiVo, Inc. collects something it calls "Anonymous Viewing Information," and that bothers some people. Anonymous Viewing Information means TiVo collects all your remote's actions and sends them off to TiVo, Inc. The corporation, in turn, knows what you've watched, and what you've recorded. It also knows what you've paused, what you've rewound, and what you've watched frame by frame in slow motion.

However, the corporation *doesn't* link these intimate viewing details to your name, household, or address. Instead, they lump everybody's data into general geographic locations — Zip Codes, for instance. That lets TiVo's PR department announce things like, "During last night's Academy Awards, 1,263 TiVo viewers in Dorset, Vermont, used Instant Replay when Madonna tripped."

Although I'm a privacy advocate, I like TiVo's approach. I prefer to let them know *exactly* what I watch. Hopefully, the broadcasters will take notice, stop canceling my favorite shows, and begin scheduling more stuff that matches my interests. I view it as casting an anonymous vote for my favorite TV shows. TiVo already supplements Nielsen's ratings, providing an easy way to gauge a show's popularity.

If you feel this invades your privacy, however, tell TiVo to knock it off by calling (877) FOR-TIVO; they'll remove you from their list. You'll find more information about TiVo and your privacy on the company's Web site at www.tivo.com/privacy.

TiVo's Sweet Little Gifts

After TiVo knows your interests, the friendly box begins leaving you little presents. It works like this: Unless you're recording a weekend marathon of back-to-back *Simpsons* episodes, TiVo usually has some leftover space on its hard drive. Eager to please, TiVo fills that empty space with shows it thinks you might enjoy, based on the shows you're currently recording.

After you watch a Western or two, for example, TiVo may record a few extra cowboy films in the hopes you'll enjoy them. Watching a lot of Audrey Hepburn? You may find several of her other movies on your Now Playing list.

- ✓ TiVo records suggestions only if there's room. If it's already stuffed full with shows you've told it to record, TiVo stifles its urge to record suggestions.
- ✓ When your hard drive fills up and TiVo needs more room to record your favorite shows, TiVo starts housecleaning by automatically deleting any suggestions to free up space.
- ✓ TiVo's remote contains a "Thumbs Up" and a "Thumbs Down" button. If you remember, use these buttons to rate shows you've watched. The more you use the "Thumbs" buttons, the better TiVo knows you, leading to more accurate Suggestions.
- ✓ If TiVo doesn't seem to know the *real* you, I explain how to nudge TiVo's suggestions in the right direction in Chapter 11.



TiVo and Your Home Computer

Many people try to avoid computers. Others prefer intimate contact, setting up Web sites to constantly monitor their hot tub's temperature. TiVo's happy to oblige computer enthusiasts with its "Home Media Option."

The Home Media Option (HMO), available for an additional fee, lets you connect your TiVo to your computer, often through a wireless connection. With TiVo connected to your computer through HMO, you can settle into your favorite armchair and view all your digital photos on TV, even though they're still stored on your computer. You can hear any computer music files through your TiVo, as well — and the music files sound fantastic when hooked to the home stereo, by the way. If you own *two* TiVos, you can even transfer shows from one TiVo to another.

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I explain how to use the Home Media Option to your best advantage — and stretch it to its limits — in Chapters 8 and 9. (No, you can't send shows to a friend's TiVo, just to your *own* TiVos.)

Saving Shows to VCR or DVD Burner

If you and your VCR are inseparable, TiVo teams up with it fairly well. When TiVo records a show that you absolutely *must* add to your videotape cabinet, choose TiVo's Save to VCR option, described in Chapter 6. When TiVo begins playing back your show for the VCR, neatly displaying the show's name in a black stripe along the bottom, press the VCR's Record button.

No, TiVo won't edit out the commercials, but you can do that yourself, if you baby-sit your VCR's Pause button during the recording process.



Sony brand TiVos mind-meld with Sony VCRs: Pressing the Save to VCR option makes TiVo turn on your VCR, automatically record the show, and turn off the VCR when it's through. (You still have to put the tape inside yourself.)

Some TiVo models include a built-in DVD recorder, letting you save your shows to a DVD just as easily. I discuss different TiVo models in Chapter 2. TiVo can send shows to a portable DVD burner just as easily as a VCR; TiVo neither knows nor cares that you're connecting a DVD burner instead of a VCR.

Just What Does TiVo Look Like?

For such a powerful robot, TiVo wouldn't win any battlebot matches. As you can see in Figure 1-1, the typical TiVo is simply a rectangular box, much like a small VCR. Instead of a VCR's slot, clock, and buttons, most TiVo models sport a single pair of tiny lights on the front. The green light means it's currently plugged in; a red light means it's currently recording. You control everything with the remote, shown in Figure 1-2.

Things are more interesting around the back. There, you'll spot a dozen or so connectors sprouting from the case, ready to accommodate a barrage of sound, video, and TV cables. I show more detailed views in Chapter 2 and explain what cable plugs in where.

TiVo is actually *two* things, as described more fully in the next chapter. The *TiVo box*, sold in most stereo stores, and the *TiVo Service*, which supplies your TiVo with the station listings in your area.

The TiVo Service requires a monthly fee to grab and sort through your personalized channel listings. Prices vary according to your particular TiVo model. (Many TiVo models offer “Lifetime” subscriptions where you pay up front to avoid the monthly fee.)

Figure 1-1:
TiVo looks
much like a
VCR, sans
slot and
blinking
clock.



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Figure 1-2:
The remote
for many
TiVo models
resembles a
large,
elongated
peanut.



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Chapter 2 holds the dirt on different TiVo models, TiVo Service plans, and which TiVo model works best for your particular television setup, be it a home theater with a satellite dish, or an old “rabbit ears” model from the thrift shop.

What *Can't* TiVo Do?

Although TiVo works very well as your personal television manager, some tasks remain beyond its reach. This should clear up some of the more common TiVo misconceptions.

TiVo can't record TiVo shows from the past. My friend Jim called the other night, asking if I could use my TiVo to watch a show that ran two nights ago. Nope. TiVo can record shows currently airing, and it will schedule recordings for shows airing in the future, but not even a TiVo can pull things out of the past. However, if you enter a few descriptive words about the show — its title, for instance, or the actors' names — TiVo can often catch a rerun.

TiVo can record only channels that you already receive. TiVo isn't a source of television shows. It simply sifts through the shows you already receive, automatically recording the ones you want and ignoring the ones you don't. You still need a TV signal, whether it comes from an antenna, cable, or satellite box.

TiVo can't simultaneously record two TV shows. Unless you're receiving DirecTV satellite broadcasts with a DirecTV model of TiVo, you can't record two shows simultaneously. However, with a bit of installation trickery (covered in

Chapter 2), you can record one show while you're watching another live show on a different channel. (TiVo always lets you watch any previously recorded show as it records a new show in the background.)

Not all TiVos record HDTV. Most TiVos can't store High Definition TV signals. At the time of this writing, only a few newer models of DirecTV TiVos can record and play back HDTV programming.

TiVo can't send video to your computer. Even with the Home Media Option, TiVo doesn't provide a way to send your TV shows to your computer. And currently it won't play video from your computer, either. TiVo's new “TiVo to Go” feature, however, plans to add this option. You'll find more information about it at TiVo's Web site (www.tivo.com).

TiVo doesn't work worldwide. Currently, TiVo works only with U.S. and U.K. programming. (TiVos are no longer manufactured for the U.K. market, but TiVo service remains available for customers who bought one.) United Kingdom TiVo information awaits you at uk.tivo.com. TiVo isn't available in Canada, unfortunately, but they still have better beer.