

Advances in the design of entertainment centers have kept up with the advances in home electronics. Whether you want to hide your electronics away or highlight their sleek design, there is something on the market to suit your needs.

The wide-screen dimensions of new TVs don't often fit in older entertainment centers. Many newer designs are adjustable to accommodate different sized TVs; however, you should still measure your TV before you go shopping for an entertainment center. Measure all three dimensions: height, width and depth. Technology has changed a lot in recent years, so you should not assume that all set dimensions are pretty much the same.

Alternatives

Entertainment center is a general term that can apply to a number of different pieces of furniture used to house TVs, stereos and the like. This article will outline some of the different options that are available.

A TV cart is the most basic piece of furniture designed to support a TV. The TV remains in the open, sitting on top, and limited storage is located in the lower portion of the cart. The storage may be open shelves or it may be concealed behind doors.

Entertainment armoires are designed to hide away the TV and other electronic components. They offer more storage than a TV cart and when the doors are closed, they give no hint as to their contents. Newly manufactured armoires on the market today can be used to house a TV. Manufacturers build the armoires with cord access holes for this purpose; some even incorporate double hinges or pocket doors that tuck away for better TV viewing.

Consoles have become more prominent as high-definition TVs have become more common in the market. They are wider than TV carts and offer a more stable support for modern, wide-aspect TVs. Some console designs have built-in hydraulic lifts that can move a flat-panel TV (one no more than 5" in depth) up and down, tucking it away when not in use. Some consoles come with hutches that allow you to mount flat panel TVs and provide additional media storage.

Entertainment walls are designed to be customized to your storage needs and give you the look of built-in cabinetry. Several different components can be mixed and matched to suit your needs. TV carts, armoires and consoles are all options that can be incorporated into an entertainment wall, usually at the center. This

center piece is flanked by other storage pieces.

Media piers go on either side of the TV housing. They consist of a narrow cabinet with doors or open shelves. Many piers incorporate glass doors at the top with interior lighting. If you choose a pier like this, be sure the lighting is easy to access and operate. Many media piers offer built-in storage for CDs, DVDs and videos.

A light bridge is part of an entertainment wall that connects two media piers or cabinets. The bridge can be used over a console or TV cart, or it can simply frame a free-standing big-screen TV. It has integrated lighting and often incorporates a shelf and a back panel that ties the wall together.

Open curio/bookshelf units are another option to add to your entertainment wall. They offer additional storage and complete the look with attractive, coordinated display areas. Shelving units with lights should be easy to access and operate.

Features to look for

Many manufacturers offer different options for the doors on their entertainment furniture. Some offer glass doors so that the remote will work without having the doors open. Speaker grills are another option offered by many manufacturers: cabinet doors are fitted with speaker fabric that allows sound to travel through them.

Better manufacturers integrate easy hook-up systems that don't require you to crawl inside your entertainment unit to install a new DVD player or other component. An integrated cord management system means that not only will your components be easy to hook up, but the cords will be tidy and out of the way too. Integrated surge protectors help to protect your electronics from power surges and voltage spikes.

Housing for each of your components is important to consider when you are shopping for a home entertainment center. Take inventory of everything you hook up to your TV and make sure the entertainment center can not only house it, but house it so that it is easy to access and use. Storage designed specifically to house gaming controls and cartridges are another great feature. They hide all the clutter away, yet keep it easy to access and use.

Don't forget about storage for DVDs, videos and other entertainment media. Many entertainment systems have built-in, easy access storage, some with pull-out organizers that allow you to easily flip through titles.

If you expect to upgrade your electronics in the next few years you might want to consider an expandable entertainment wall. Some manufacturers design consoles and light bridges have multiple settings to fit TVs from 45" to 67".

Construction

Like any case good purchase, you will want to look for the following structural details before you buy. Overall, the piece should be sturdy and should not wobble when rocked. Corner blocks should be used to insure the stability of the piece and levelers will help to make sure that all the doors and drawers line up correctly.

Drawers should be constructed with dovetail joints for strength and stability. The drawers should move easily on their glides and should have stops to prevent overextension. Good quality glides will use ball bearings or nylon wheels to make it easier to move the drawer. Drawers for media and component storage should have compound glides for full access to the drawer contents.

Doors should fit well and should not have any visible gaps. They should be easy to open and should not squeak or rub. Be sure to check out all the options that are available for doors in the entertainment center you choose.