

PERSONAL VIDEO RECORDER OF THE YEAR

PRODUCT OF THE YEAR



Strong SRT 5495A

We reckon a good PVR needs at least two HD tuners, with a hard-drive of 500GB or up, and certainly no Freeview badge (so you can ad-skip and archive your recordings). Ease of use and clarity of display are essential, of course, and we have rather a bugbear about the number of PVRs that output HD excellently, but actually reduce (sometimes halve) the quality of standard-def channels. It's true. Don't get us started.

Strong's 5495A is a recent release that ticks all the boxes, including the one marked "value", given it does everything right at a competitive

\$499. It offers all the usual outputs, including HDMI and component video, also composite and S-Video. And it has the excellent bonus of external *inputs* — component or composite video along with stereo audio, using built-in analogue-to-digital converters for video (as MPEG2, though at 480i/576i only) and audio to store your own stuff alongside TV recordings. This allows you to use the unit as a recorder for, say, your Foxtel box, or for digitising old recordings from a VCR. You can even program timer recordings for the external inputs.

If the internal 500GB isn't enough for you (or if you fill it up), you can add an external USB

hard-drive to the SRT 5495 and make that the default for ongoing recordings.

What didn't we like? The onscreen interface is a bit cartoony, and the guide shows only one channel at a time, without the usual option of an all-channel grid. And exporting recordings, while possible, is a bit of a task, requiring fixing your computer's IP address and handling folders of .trp files.

Still, the SRT 5495A does it all, it gets SD channels right, and it'll even record three channels at once if two of them are from the same provider. All that at \$499? We congratulate Strong on a great PVR. www.strong.com.au

HIGHLY COMMENDED PVRs

Topfield TRF-2460...

HIGHLY COMMENDED



Its full name is the Topfield TRF-2460 Masterpiece HD Plus, which rather hints at the company's pride in creating pretty much the ultimate PVR. It has a one-terabyte hard-drive, it has component and composite inputs for recording from Foxtel or a VCR, and its twin HD tuners will allow you to record up to four separate channels at once (and watch a recording at the same time) if two of them share the same provider (e.g. ABC 1 and ABC2, Nine and GEM, etc.). The onscreen interface is excellent — clear, well-designed, largely idiot-proof, and the remote control is a weighty beauty.

It's also a flexible media player, handling a very wide range of music, video and photo formats from USB, memory card and across your home network from a computer or networked hard-drive. It can also play some web content, such as YouTube, Flickr pictures and ShoutCAST internet radio stations. And given a recent price-drop from \$1299 to \$799, all this suddenly looks like a bargain... www.itopfield.com.au

Strong SRT 5429

HIGHLY COMMENDED



Under \$200, you can't expect every bell and whistle on your PVR, but Strong's SRT 5429 makes some good choices. It has just one HD tuner rather than two, and the hard drive is 160GB rather than the common 320GB or preferable 500GB. Still, that's enough for about 60 hours of standard definition or 23 hours of HD — and if you need more space you can simply add an external hard drive using the USB socket on the front panel.

It's worth mentioning that Strong always uses MPEG4 tuners, which futureproof against our broadcasters moving to the more efficient MPEG4 from the current MPEG2 — which they may soon be allowed to do in order to fit in more channels. (Most new PVRs include MPEG4 now, but not all, and Strong was very early to market with MPEG4, and we criticised them at the time for it!)

Given the price and performance of this unit from Strong, why would you ever buy a mere set-top box? www.strong.com.au