



Strong STR 5492

If you're looking to enjoy the benefits of digital recording, Strong's STR 5492 has a lot to offer.

Building on its good reputation for set-top boxes, Strong's STR 5492 features two HDTV tuners so you can change channel while recording. Most twin-tuner PVRs let you record two channels at once, but the Strong lets you record three (as long as they're not from more than two networks). Meanwhile, you can watch something you've recorded earlier or watch a fourth live channel. If you're recording from two networks, that fourth channel must be from one of those networks, plus you can't time-shift that fourth channel.

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Another impressive feature is Mosaic Mode, offering a glimpse of what's on the other channels. You can choose to open a grid of 2, 4, 6 or 9 windows on the screen — calling up a few seconds of video from that many channels. From here you click on any window to start the video playing and then click on it again to watch that channel.

The Strong is blessed with a friendly onscreen interface, including a playback timeline, that won't intimidate non-tech savvy members of the household. The remote control is a little daunting at first, but Strong has printed its help desk phone number and email address on the back.

When it comes to advanced features the Strong gets a tick in almost every box. You can pause and rewind live TV plus watch the beginning of a program while still recording the end, although it doesn't warn against

changing the channel while time-shifting. You also can skip the ads.

Global pre- and post-padding of 5, 10 or 15 minutes is available — although 15 minutes still isn't enough sometimes and we'd also like to see 30 and 60 minutes. One of the Strong's key strengths is that it has an Ethernet port and is IceTV-compatible, letting you schedule Season Pass recordings via a browser or smartphone. The lack of Wi-Fi is disappointing

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Digital Video Recorders

considering the Strong is aimed at mainstream users less likely to have Ethernet ports in the lounge room.

The Strong's onscreen EPG displays six channels plus a live preview of the channel you were watching, but the trade-off is that it's a little cramped. You can schedule recordings from the onscreen guide and call up a menu to create recurring recordings. Remember, it can't check the guide for schedule changes unless you create a Season Pass using IceTV.

Unlike some devices, the Strong's EPG indicates which programs are scheduled to record. If you try to schedule more than two recordings at the same time, it warns you and asks which scheduled recording you want to cancel. As for overlap management due to padding, if both tuners are in use it will cut off the beginning of the next show in favour of recording the post-padding on the earlier shows (thankfully global pre- and post-padding can be set to different values).



One feature sadly lacking from this recorder is intelligent storage management: there's no way to set it to automatically delete old recordings to make way for new ones so you need to ensure the hard drive doesn't fill up. Thankfully, you can transfer recordings to an external USB device or to a PC via your home network. You can even record directly to a USB device, plus you can play MP3 and JPG files from a USB device.

If you're looking for a well-priced PVR that strikes a balance between advanced features and usability, Strong's STR 5492 should certainly be on your shortlist.

\$599

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- **Hard drive:** 500GB (up to 60 hours HD or 250 hours SD)
- **Video Outputs:** HDMI, Component, S-Video, RF pass-through
- **Video Inputs:** none
- **Audio Outputs:** analogue stereo, optical digital
- **Audio Inputs:** none
- **Networking:** Ethernet

There is no one dream Personal Video Recorder, choosing the best device for your lounge room is a question of compromise.

If you're looking for a flexible recorder to support a household of demanding viewers, devices such as the Sony and Dvico should be avoided. The ability to record two shows at once, while doing something else, shouldn't be open to negotiation.

After eliminating the Sony and Dvico, selecting a Personal Video Recorder comes down to personal choice. The Beyonwiz DP-P2 is probably the best device in terms of features and value for money, with the ability to automatically delete old recordings making it close to a set-and-forget device. Beyonwiz's Achilles' Heel is its complicated interface, something we'd be reluctant to inflict on non tech-savvy members of the household.

Meanwhile, the Topfield TRF-2460 Masterpiece HD Plus has a hefty feature set matched by a hefty price tag. The menus are user friendly, plus the inclusion of a UBS Wi-Fi stick makes it a good choice for those who haven't run Ethernet cables from the study to the lounge room. The generous hard drive helps you forgive the lack of intelligent storage management. The Topfield's price tag is a killer, but keep in mind that both Topfield and Beyonwiz sell cheaper models that might be more to your liking, but be sure to avoid the Freeview-endorsed models as they disable features such as ad-skipping.

If you're looking for something that strikes a good balance between features and usability, the Strong STR 5492 is a serious contender (you might see it in Harvey Norman labelled as the 5495, sporting a different face plate). Only the

Conclusion

lack of Wi-Fi is disappointing considering that it's targeted at mainstream users.

That just leaves TiVo. The TiVo is the best or the worst of the bunch, depending on what you're looking for. If you're a power user looking for something with all the bells and whistles, the TiVo is not for you. If you're looking for an easy-to-use, family-friendly device with powerful PVR features, the TiVo stands out from the crowd. If you're helping a non tech-savvy relative embrace digital recording then TiVo should be at the top of your shopping list, although the need for a broadband connection could be a showstopper in some non-tech lounge rooms. If you're after something that "just works", TiVo is the one to beat.