



SageTV Tip #9: HD Content With HDHomeRun

I purchased an HDHomeRun receiver, and I now have access to four "local broadcast" HD channels through SageTV! The channels seamlessly show up in SageTV's Electronic Program Guide (EPG) and I can now view and record any show on those channels. And any HD content views, records, and plays back in full HD glory! Read on to see my experience with this excellent product...

Some Background On HD In The PVR World

HD content is typically provided in one of three ways: Satellite, Cable, and Over-the-air (OTA). Unfortunately for PVR applications like SageTV, Satellite providers encrypt all channels, so a Set-Top-Box (STB) is required to receive HD content. And in almost all cases, there is no PC-compatible output on the STB to pass through the HD content to be able to record the (true) HD content. Cable providers also encrypt most channels and therefore also require a STB for decoding. But the good news is that most cable providers leave the "local broadcast" HD channels unencrypted. For OTA broadcast channels, you would need a suitable antenna and an HD decoder box to receive the HD content. For these last two cases, this is where HDHomeRun comes in.

For Cable, it's a simple matter of connecting your cable directly to an input on the HDHomeRun box and running a configuration application to scan for digital channels. If digital channels are found, the application will tell you if they are "encrypted" or not. If a channel is encrypted, you cannot view it—no exceptions. But if it is not encrypted, then you should be able to view it. You can reasonably expect local broadcast channels (like NBC, FOX, PBS, etc.) to be available, but it all depends on how your cable company configures their channels. You may be able to view lots of HD channels, you may have just a few, or you may have none. In any case, "premium" HD channels will likely always be encrypted.

For OTA, again, it's a matter of aiming the antenna, connecting the cable to the HDHomeRun box, and running the configuration application. I have not used this method, so I cannot speak to it. I can only describe my experience with a Cable source from Charter.

In either case, HDHomeRun provides two source input connections, so you can connect any combination of Cable or OTA sources.

Out Of The Box

OK, so I received my shiny new HDHomeRun, and like every review I've read states, it's sparse packaging. But it includes everything you need to hook up. The only thing you may need to purchase is a good splitter to split your cable signal. The unit itself is completely unlabeled, and it would be nice to have some indication of what the LED's mean and which input connection is which. They do include a printed "cheat sheet", but in reality, once you get things set up, labels are pretty irrelevant.

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Initial Setup

Setup of the HDHomeRun was a snap. Instead of trying to get it to work with SageTV right away, I decided to just test it with my wireless laptop. As an aside, I do recommend using the DOS version of the configuration utility to generate a text file containing the complete scan results. It's a LOT quicker than manually scanning using the GUI. Maybe the GUI could be updated to provide a full, automated scan.

I ran the DOS HdHomeRun_config tool and found lots of digital channels on Charter Cable in Anderson, SC (Greenville/Spartanburg/Anderson) but alas, most were marked "encrypted". Using the GUI application, I selected one of those non-encrypted channels, launched VLC, and voila...rystal-clear HD content! Very nice!

In all, I have 11 viewable channels and about 50+ music channels (I haven't played with these yet.) Of the 11 channels, 4 are actual "HD" channels.

Digital but not HD channels

77-3 An unknown Spanish channel
77-4 GAC Great American Country
78-2 WYFFDT2 Weather
78-7 WHNSDT2 Weather
78-8 WSPADT2 Weather
86-8 SC
90-1-54 Music channels
91-1 BET

HD channels

103-1 WYFFDT NBC
103-2 WSPADT CMS
103-3 WNTVDT3 PBS
104-1 WHNSDT FOX

So the bad news is that I only get 4 HD channels.

But the great news is that I now get 4 HD channels! And that's EXACTLY what I wanted! They are viewable and recordable through SageTV. Of course, I would love to have more channels such as HDNet, DiscoveryHD, etc., but my wife and I are perfectly happy with this current lineup.

Sagetv Setup

I logged the viewable channel/program numbers and began the SageTV setup process. If you follow the instructions, it actually isn't that difficult. It took me a couple tries, because I was unsure if I had to stop the SageTV services or not, so I just did, and it worked. The HDHomeRun tuner showed up as a selection in SageTV's "Video Sources" setup screen. Things were looking good.

Next came the challenge of how to configure the channels in SageTV's EPG. In retrospect, it's not difficult, but your setup can dictate how it'll work. I managed to mess a couple things up, but fixing things was easy.

A Brief Explanation Of My Source Setup

I have two Hauppauge PVR-150 cards. One is connected to raw analog cable providing channels 2-99, and the other to a digital STB providing channels 2-799. Charter Cable provides several EPG selections for my area, so when I did my original SageTV setup, I had to choose two separate EPG selections to accommodate the channel overlap. Adding the HDHomeRun to the mix now complicated things because I had four channels to add. I was a bit confused by what I should choose. After some trial-and-error, I discovered that Charter has a "Local Broadcast" EPG selection, so I just used that for the HD channels, and it worked perfectly.

My EPG selections are:

Basic Cable – assigned to the Analog PVR0150

Extended Basic Cable – assigned to the STB PVR-150

Local Broadcast – assigned to the HDHomeRun

At that point, it was just a matter of enabling the channels and mapping the physical numbers using the channel/program info that I logged from the channel scan. To make things easier, I also mapped the new HD channels to different virtual channel numbers in SageTV. I chose 801, 802, 803 & 804 since those channels aren't used in my SD lineups. This makes finding the new HD channels in the EPG a snap.

I now have a nice, clean EPG with Channels 2-99 seamlessly shared by the analog and STB connections, digital channels 100-799 serviced by the STB connection only, and channels 801-804 serviced by HDHomeRun.

A Small Nitpick

The HDHomeRun's audio is soft on most HD shows—not all, but most. I have to turn it way up. We just have to remember to turn the volume down when we switch to SD channels.

A Quick Tip

Now that I have access to HD content (whough it is limited) I wanted a way to quickly find HD-only content. I use malore's excellent "customizable menus plugin" for SageTV, so I simply modified two of his custom menus (Menu2 & Menu3) and configured them to only show HDTV content. I then configured one menu to group and sort by date, and the other to group by title and sort by date. So I now have a quick & easy way to see what HD content I can record. VERY nice!

Conclusion

I now have a SageTV setup that provides full DVR capabilities to analog and digital SD content, and limited HD content. And because the stuttering issue is behind us, we can now really enjoy SageTV, on

our HDTV as it was intended! And frankly, some of the PBS shows are simply visually stunning. And it is completely seamless in the EPG. There's nothing "special" we have to do to record or watch anything. It just simply works!

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