



Ten O'Clock Tech

Talk To Friends Through Your TV

Arik Hesseldahl, 09.18.03, 10:00 AM ET

The videophone is one of those funny little devices first born in science fiction and then becoming an obscure technological reality. But it never really took off with consumers.

Maybe that's because consumers never had access to an easy-to-use videophone. Certainly the Beamer from **Vialta**, [which we noted here last year](#), meets that definition. It's a curious little tabletop unit that uses a normal home phone line to send a video image to a second Beamer unit, which the two parties talking use as their usual phone handset for the audio. There's no other services to add, nor are there any additional fees. Using the Beamer adds no extra charges to your phone bill.



Courtesy Vialta
Vialta's Beamer TV

They're still selling through electronics retailers, and generally building up a word-of-mouth following. Fremont, Calif.-based Vialta, which trades over the counter, has reported sales of \$6.4 million for the first six months of the year, and finished last quarter with a \$1.1 million loss.

Now the company has a follow-up product called the Beamer TV. Instead of using a self-contained display, Beamer TV uses your TV set. The unit contains a camera, and is best suited to sit right atop the TV set. Video is sent to the TV using an RCA video connector. It also needs to connect to your phone line. Any household phone will do.

Video quality can be a bit choppy at times. Don't expect the same fluid video quality you've come to expect from the TV. But there are settings to adjust for video quality. If you want to be able to see movements better, you lose a bit of overall picture quality. The better the picture quality, the choppiest the movement.



Courtesy Vialta
The Beamer TV in action.

There's also a snapshot mode in which the unit takes a still image and presents that to the party you're talking to. This is great if you'd rather not be seen moving around during the call, or if the kids want to show a picture they've drawn.

As with the original beamer, the audio portion of the call is handled the old-fashioned way, by phone. But as we said, any household phone will do, and it does work with speaker phones.

Of course it only works if you have two, one on each end. You'll want to buy a pair, and give one to someone you call often. Incidentally, Beamer products do work outside the U.S. And the Beamer TV is fully compatible with the original Beamer.

The original Beamer sold for \$300 but is now down to \$250. The Beamer TV is already shipping to retailers with a suggested price of \$150. If you've been waiting to live in the age of the videophone, the wait is over.

More From Forbes

[Smile, The Videophone's Ringing](#) 09.20.02 Videophones never took off with consumers. Maybe the Beamer will change that.

