

Women and VCRs



I was expecting wry smiles and complaints about setting the clocks and how difficult VCRs are to program. And a great myth about women is how much trouble they have with equipment, any equipment, right? I know that I actively dislike re-setting all the clocks in my house after the power dips.

We need a VCR to have a home theater. While they seem extremely complicated—to my surprise, the women I spoke with find them fairly easy to use. I talked with women who aren't good with equipment, as well as women who really use these machines for all they are worth, and overall, I was surprised how few complaints I heard.

On the other hand, virtually every woman I talked to uses the manual—even after years of use with one machine. I had anticipated comments about the difficulty of programming and re-setting the clock, but basically, the machines do what they say they're going to do.

Just a few months ago another woman, in this very magazine, wrote in-depth about programming a VCR. So, we know they are not always easy to use. How many times have we set our VCRs to tape that special program and it doesn't, even when we are sure we did everything right? One of my friends says she uses her VCR as a clock. Period.

My sister, who lives in a trailer park in the desert in California uses her equipment extensively. She tapes and edits and dubs and makes copies. She has a camcorder and uses it a lot. She has a very good VCR. She is familiar with things like "flying erase heads," which I only know is an advanced editing feature (Good Lord, it sounds like a UFO or a rock band!)

"I have one trunk and two boxes of video tapes," she said. "I have a camcorder. I record, tape to other machines, even though the other machine isn't as good as mine. I use it 'every which way but loose.'"

My sister's video equipment is important to her. She went on a spiritual journey to Egypt and taped everything. She edited them and sent copies to me. I play them on my VCR. She admits she spent a fair amount of money on her VCR (and all her video equipment)—"I bought a good one." This is a woman who lives simply in other ways, and has little interest in "living well," or having the latest "hot" product. She has a Panasonic VCR, which uses VHS tapes, and she believes it is an Omni Vision. I asked her what features it had and she rattled them off like a salesperson:

"Flying erase heads, line in (keeps in edit mode and keeps distortion down), record in mono or hi-fi, all kinds of things... I can dub, it can dub outside audio, and can be added later... The remote control has

learning, so it can pick up other equipment... I can use tracking on the remote—two times faster, repeat, index, memory, clock.” By this time, my mind was reeling. I used to be in advertising and my sister, who was a school teacher once upon a time, is using her VCR like a professional film editor.



“It has digital quality tuning with auto features. On screen display program (menu). The tape counter is in real time. It has regular record, long play, and extended play. It has special effects playback, fast search, double speed playback, sealed still, field frame advance (moves ahead one frame at a time), double fine slow.”

Facetiously, I asked, “Is that all?” I really was hoping she was done with her list.

“No,” she said. “It has a VHS hi-fi stereo sound system, MTS I think And one touch record (OTR), in 30-minute increments.”

“Do you use all these things,” I asked?

“Oh, yes,” she said, and went on. “It searches—automatically moves to the next program. Or I can set up an index. I do synchronized editing with another VCR—start and stop at the push of one button.” What this meant to me, was an easier way to record. With the older models, like mine, you had to do the synchronizing yourself. And I’m not too good at that.

“I use the index and can just go to the beginning of the next section at the push of a button. It helps with editing, too.”

“So, what do you like about it?”

“All of it. I like how it records. I use it a lot.”

“What don’t you like about it? . . . ”

Silence.

“I mean, with all these features, surely there’s something you don’t like. . . ”

Another silence... “I can’t think of anything.”

“Do you work all this from the remote?”

“Most. Most of this is from the remote. There’s more on the remote than on the VCR itself. I can record by

bar code scanner.”

Bar code scanner? I still don’t know what this means.

“It’s real easy. Not confusing. The operating instructions booklet is understandable. I use it fairly often.”

This was a big surprise to me. After talking about all these features, which she knew by heart, and having told me she uses this machine often and in fairly complex ways, I was not expecting her to need the manual. So, I asked why.

“Most everything shows on the screen. I don’t use all the features, I’m sure. The biggest bug is how to turn it off if it’s in the middle of doing something—like the timer or one-time-record. So, I go to the book, and it’s very clear what to do.”

No problems? Ever?

“Well, once I left the remote on the floor—it did it’s own thing—and I didn’t touch it.”

“What do you use it most often for?”

“Recording, using the camcorder, making copies.”

“What did you pay for it?”

“About \$600. It’s extra light weight, great for moving it around and setting it up to copy with another machine. I like the “real time” counter (which would appeal to me, too). It has four heads. I type in instructions, date, time, and channel.”

She likes it, she uses it, she reads the manual.

Georgia, my friend from New York, complained for years that she couldn’t figure out how to make her VCR work. She even took it to a store to get instructions. She never did figure out how to make it do what she wanted.

This year, Georgia lives in Oregon. She has an Emerson VCR, one of the most popular brands. She said “It’s a cheap brand, but it really does a good job, no faults. I haven’t bought anything in so long. I live with my niece. We bought the VCR within the last 6 months. It has two remotes.”

“What other features does it have?”

“Timed recording. Tape counter. I think it has two heads.” Silence. “Several event programming.”

“Do you like it?” I asked.

She laughed. “Yes. I figured out how to program it. Its easy. Fairly easy. I haven’t figured out my one in New York.”

“Is there anything you don’t like?”

“I can’t read the numbers on the display from across the room. Things like the time, the channel. It pro-



grams from the remote—I think I have to program it from the remote.”

“Is that a plus? “

“Yes, I don’t have to get up.”

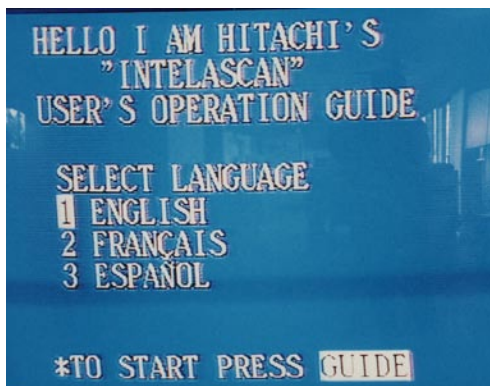
She considers herself a moderate user. “I use it maybe four times a week, for tapes or to record something.”

Pat is a financial planner. She is a successful business woman, and I don’t think of her as an equipment junkie. I think of her as a woman who has little time and wants things to work as they are advertised. We talked about women and equipment in general.

“I think we’re (women) more adept. I read a book and changed a faucet. I’ve changed the insides of a toilet. We have the patience to read the instructions. My husband just gets impressions. I remember he broke a whole fixture just changing the bulb.”

I asked about VCRs. “Everybody has trouble with VCRs, not just women We have a user friendly one and I still read the instructions. I think it’s a Hitachi. It has a menu on the screen. Everything works from the remote, it doesn’t work from the TV (VCR box).”

She said they had bought this system recently and had gone looking purposely for one that was easy to use. They bought this brand and model in part because of the menu system, which is virtually universal now. I asked if they got what they bought? And if the menu was easy to use.



“There were no real surprises, good or bad I thought with the menu it would be easier.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. It’s all right Even with the guide, sometimes it’s difficult. Sometimes even with it all set up it doesn’t record. I don’t know why.”

Unlike my sister, Pat admitted they use their machine in a limited way and don’t tap into many of its advanced features.

“We use it for playing movies basically. We don’t record much It has lots of features I’m sure we’ve never used.”

What about the instruction manual. “Is it clear? Do you use it?”

“Yes, we use the instruction book, especially for timed recordings. I’m sure a lot of people have trouble with programming, and the clock We usually hire someone to do everything that needs doing. Not the VCR. But someone said if you have trouble, let your kids do it.”

Another friend is a painter. She deals with her world visually. I thought she would use her VCR a lot. She



doesn't, and if she needs something done with her VCR, she asks her husband to do it.

"We don't use it much. It sort of sits there. I use the clock. My husband plays some tapes from his cousin. Corny family things. It was terrible. I have my Callinetics tape and I never use it. It was very rough on me. I also have my new tape of Tai Chi which I've only used once. Once in a blue moon I rent a movie and I watch it. It's a big enterprise to use it. I forget how to use it, so then I push a few buttons until a light goes on. I don't use it much alone as I ask my husband. My grandson uses it a lot—"Aladdin," "The Magic Tollbooth." But, even he hasn't figured out yet how to record. It's not one of my priorities."

I asked if she used her manual?

"Manual?"

"Do you use your manual?"

Silence.

I laughed. "Do you even know where your manual is?"

"No," she replied, laughing back at me. "I don't know."

Okay. What about me? I think I'm pretty good with equipment. I can fix things, but often I just find that process tedious, not necessarily difficult. My father wouldn't let any of us get our driver's licenses until we could change a tire. So, I'm not incompetent. In terms of VCRs, I use it to record programs I'm not home to see, and movies. I have quite a collection. I used to use it to record music videos (and wouldn't an index be great for this?)



I have two VCRs in my home. An old one and a less old one. The really old one is an RCA, a Selecta Vision, bought in the '70s. The manual for my "very old" machine is dog-eared and still sits right on top of the VCR, held in place by the very simple remote. One day soon, that manual will be an antique.

It has simple features—a remote with a power button, channel up, channel down, play, stop, record, rewind search, pause, fast forward search, and the TV/VCR button. The programming feature could be set but you had to scroll in only one direction to get to the right time. Setting the timer to 8:59 took time, and caused frustration if you went just one second too far. The picture quality on this recorder is better than my other one. I used the machine to record from the TV—Reilly Ace of Spies and music videos. And movies.

My other VCR, the newer one, is hooked up to my big screen TV and my satellite receiver. It has four heads and a more complicated remote. It has hi-fi stereo and pause buttons. It has buttons to set the time by pushing up or down, so the setting of the time and channel is easier. Also it has a nice display for which event I'm on, and a nice video graphic to let me know when a tape is in the machine. It does not have a menu. I bought it because it was compact and because Zenith is a dependable brand.

It basically does what I want, but every once in a while it doesn't record. I hate the fact that I have to re-set the clock when the power goes out—then I have to get out the manual to make sure I'm doing it right. And I have to lie down on the floor and take off my glasses and put my face right up to the controls to re-set the clock or to set the timer—because my VCR sits on the bottom shelf of my TV cart.

There are many features I don't use. I don't even know what all the buttons are for—like PC, or Flashback, or Ent/RCL or Source. Like my computer, the VCR has loads of capabilities. But I try to keep it simple—and learn only what I must to meet my basic needs.



So what's new?

Newer features that appeal to me are the real time counters, the menus, and the jog wheel, that allows more control over "freeze frame." Higher quality pictures are also important to me as I do take pictures off the TV set (of Billy Idol, for example) from the music videos I've recorded. That, of course, would require getting a high quality TV set, too. But, I must say, I look at some of these new remotes with thousands of buttons (and no two remotes are remotely alike!) and many have strangely shaped buttons and wheels, and I have trouble wanting to touch them. Why can't remotes be something like universal computer keyboards? I want to learn one set of keys, like the F keys, and have them apply to my TV and my VCR as well as my computer.

Like the other women I spoke with who use their VCRs successfully—I don't use every feature, I use the manual, and I keep it simple.

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