

Laser discs are ready to fly

By Todd Schneider
staff writer

Take the super high fidelity and durability of a compact disc, add hit movies and the wide selection typical of videotapes, throw in a dash of user-friendly educational opportunity and you've got one man's recipe for the future of home electronics.

Laser discs.

This high-tech amalgam of America's two favorite home entertainment mediums in the 1980s — videocassettes and compact discs — is ready to take the world by storm, according to John O'Brien.

And if it does, O'Brien will be there leading the charge.

O'Brien is the chairman and president of LaserLand, an 18-month-old Colorado-based company, which is betting the shiny, eight-, 12- and 20-inch discs will be the next step in the audio/video revolution.

He was in town recently to demonstrate the product at LaserLand's Novi store, one of eight North American outlets.

"This technology is going to change forever the way human beings see, hear and learn," O'Brien said.

A TALL order for something designed — at least in its initial incarnation — to improve weekend television playtime.

But consider the advantages laser discs and laser disc players hold

over their tape counterparts, and maybe, just maybe, O'Brien isn't far off the mark.

So, just what is this marvel? Without dazzling you with a lot of technological mumbo jumbo, a laser disc is essentially a compact disc with pictures. Using the same basic idea behind the musical compact disc, laser discs contain the same types of movies, concerts and how-to programs (i.e. Jane Fonda's aerobic workouts) traditionally available on videotape.

The difference in the two products is in picture, sound, durability and price. Laser discs win on all four counts.

A laser disc — played through disc player, conventional television, stereo amplifier and speakers — will give you a high-resolution picture (about twice as sharp as broadcast television) and digitally recorded sound track (the same as a compact disc player).

It is scratch resistant and should last, oh, about 600 years, according to O'Brien.

IN THE other corner, we have a typical VHS videocassette, which offers a picture slightly murkier than broadcast television, begins to erode after the first play and might fill your favorite movie with white lines and snow.

Then there's the high cost of building a movie library of \$89.95 and up videotapes. Laser discs retail for

about one-third of that.

Of course, laser disc technology is not without its drawbacks.

The players sell for \$800-\$900, about three times the price of an inexpensive VCR. The players, though, can handle conventional, audio-only compact discs in addition to laser discs, eliminating the need for both machines.

O'Brien said he sees the price "probably coming down in the next two or three years."

BUT TIM Maccaedino, who holds the Novi LaserLand franchise, said the stormy American dollar vs. Japanese yen relationship makes it difficult to predict price trends.

The discs can't be used for home recording, which isn't a great loss, O'Brien said. "Only about eight percent of the VCR-owning public uses the machine to record off of home TV," he said.

Disc rental isn't part of O'Brien's operating plan, although with discount pricing, some discs can be bought for as low as \$8.

And movie watchers will have to get up at least once during a film to change sides.

BUT O'BRIEN claims the pluses far outweigh the minuses.

"Yes, CDs revolutionized the music industry. But what laser discs will do is make audio-only products obsolete."

On the Town

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AUCTION: THURSDAY EVENING, JUNE 2 7:00 p.m.

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