

DIGITAL LIFE JOHN DAVIDSON

Poor man's television puts up a good show

Buy a cheap TV and you're mostly sacrificing style.

Ruslan Kogan, the man behind the Kogan brand, says his TVs and home appliances are cheaper than more mainstream brands such as Samsung and LG because he is (and this is an actual quote) "nobody's bitch".

TV retailers such as Harvey Norman don't have the muscle to negotiate good prices from the likes of Samsung and its wholesalers, but Kogan, which has its goods manufactured in Asia, often from the same parts as the big brands, sells direct, and can control its own prices. Or so the Kogan story goes.

One might make a contrary argument: that it's Samsung – a manufacturer of so many of its own parts, I wouldn't be surprised if it made the staples in the cardboard boxes its TVs come in – which is nobody's you-know-what.

So for this week's column we thought we'd get in a Kogan TV and a Samsung TV and apply our usual scientific rigour (which usually involves asking passers-by what they think of something) to the question of who is the bigger bitch – Kogan or Samsung.

We got in a 32-inch Kogan

Deluxe Series LED TV with a built-in video recorder and a Samsung 50-inch Series 7 Plasma TV, considered one of the best-value TVs to be launched on the market in the past year.

That's not exactly a fair comparison – the \$1850 street price on the Samsung is almost three times that of the \$689 Kogan – but we were curious to know what you give up apart from obvious things such as size and a fancy bezel when you move from the mid-price to the low-price district of the TV market.

And we have to say, it's not as much as you may think. Yes, the obvious differences are fairly dramatic – the Samsung is so much prettier than the Kogan, for one – but the Kogan has features that are absent in the Samsung and that make it a genuine contender for your money.

Perhaps not in your home theatre room; but in other rooms in the house, where you may care less about aesthetics and where you may not want to spend a lot of additional money buying the extras (such as an Apple TV for watching downloaded movies, and a TiVo for recording shows) that often accompany a TV.

Comparing the picture quality produced mixed results, ranging from the Samsung plasma being

well out in front, to almost neck-and-neck, depending on what we were viewing. Plasma TVs are known for having better blacks than edge-lit LCD TVs and, while this was generally apparent in our comparison, it actually mattered a good deal less than we expected.

The blacks, great on the Samsung, were perfectly adequate on the Kogan.

Where the Samsung did outperform the Kogan in terms of picture quality, surprisingly, was in the noise levels of images.

We're not exactly sure why (we think it has something to do with the image processing engine on the Kogan, rather than with the LCD panel itself) but the picture on the Kogan was often quite noisy compared with the picture on the Samsung, as if the former had been shot in much darker conditions with a much higher gain.

It was particularly noticeable on skin tones, the exact part of any image where you don't want an issue.

In the real world, you generally don't watch two TVs at once and things that appear as noticeable defects in the shops can pass unnoticed in your home – but we think you'd notice the noise on the Kogan, which no combination of settings seemed to eliminate.

Also, the remote control on the Samsung, and that TV's menu system, were prettier and easier to use than the Kogan's, which at times got a little hard to figure out.

The Kogan has features that make it a real contender.



Setting aside those issues, the Kogan bettered the Samsung in a few respects.

Both TVs have USB slots, which allow you to plug in a USB drive and watch shows you've downloaded from the internet or ripped from your own DVDs or Blu-ray disks.

While downloaded files generally looked better on the Samsung, the Kogan supported a wider variety of formats and, given the choice between a pretty blank screen or a not-so-pretty screen with an image on it, we'd go for the image every time.

That same USB slot on the Kogan can also double as a digital video recorder. Plug in a USB hard drive, and the Kogan can use it to record broadcasts from the free-to-air channels.

The recorder is much more basic than, say, a TiVo – there are no show recommendations or season passes, and it won't allow you to record a show while you're watching another channel. You can't retrospectively save a show you've been watching – but it does make nice recordings.

Since they're on an external USB drive, they're dead simple to transfer to other PCs and TVs.

Like, say, that huge Samsung in your living room.

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