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Staff Product Reviews

Datacolor SpyderTV Review: Home Television Calibration System

Review by [Clint DeBoer](#)

September 29, 2005

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Datacolor SpyderTV Television Calibration System Review

Now Users Can Do Home Calibrations on Their Televisions



SpyderTV

Manufacturer: **Datacolor**

Overall Rating: **4/5 stars**

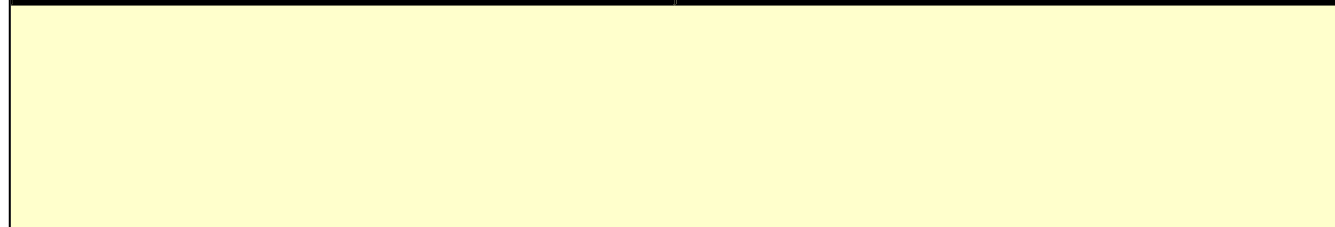
Value Rating: **4/5 stars**

Review Date: **09-25-2005**

MSRP: **\$269** [\[Find the Lowest Price\]](#)

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- Simple to use
- Only self-guided consumer luminance/color calibration solution on the market at this price point
- Automated calibration process
- Includes handy storage bag

- Tends to favor reds
- Software not as intelligent as it could be regarding testing procedure
- No front projection calibration possible
- Cannot store TV settings

Introduction

Everyone has probably walked into a mass-market consumer electronics store and been dazzled by the array of [high definition television](#) sets lined up like cattle. If you've kept a watchful eye open, you've probably also noticed that they all had differing color tones and varying levels of brightness. Many [television](#) units ship from the manufacture calibrated for one purpose: impress people walking around under florescent lighting and grab their attention. High definition television sets capable of impeccable color accuracy and black levels are consistently gained up from the factory floor to present a virtual "Buy ME!" sign which blazes forth from the set like a torch to attract the insectile consumers buzzing by. So what's the problem –if it looks good in the store...? The trouble is, most consumers *don't* have florescent lighting in their homes, and their goal (hopefully) *isn't* to use the contrast of their HDTVs to lure their neighbors from across the street. In fact, sit down long enough, and some televisions will really take a toll on your eyes (something that rarely has time to manifest in a store environment).

Enter Datacolor who, until July of 2004, dealt primarily with professional computer display calibration tools and software. Last year, however, they acquired Milori, Inc, a company specializing in the calibration of consumer electronics and maker of the famous ColorFacts Pro software used here at Audioholics. It was seemingly a marriage made in heaven and SpyderTV is the first consumer-targeted television calibration tool to hit the market that we are aware of. Considering the average price of an HDTV set falls between \$1500 and \$2500, I think the price is on-target for consumers looking to get improved performance (and life) out of their displays.

In the Box

Datacolor's SpyderTV includes the "Spyder" colorimeter which measures levels of red, green and blue emanating from direct view and rear projection televisions. It also comes with software, a Quick Start Guide, suction cup/tripod adapter, and a DVD that contains a complete tutorial/walk-through as well as test patterns which work on both 16:9 (widescreen) and 4:3 (standard aspect ratio) televisions. All you need to use the SpyderTV system is a television, DVD player, remotes and a PC or laptop (preferred) running Windows XP or 2000.



DVD Walk-Through and Tutorial

The DVD has 6 chapters under the "How to use SpyderTV" section for the disc, including a complete overview of the SpyderTV system. It goes over topics from verifying you have everything you need to get started, to walking users through the reasons behind television calibration. It completely and thoroughly steps you through the process required to use SpyderTV, including locating the television controls and understanding how to designate the methods your TV uses to make picture and color adjustments. It then goes over setup and launching of the software as well as how to attach the Spyder colorimeter to the television set.



The fifth chapter of the tutorial section of the DVD explains how to use the 7 test patterns located on the disc. It also makes mention of the "Before and After" images that are included and which allow you to really see the practical results of the SpyderTV calibration.

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The final DVD tutorial section, "Chapter 6: Guided Set-Up", contains a semi-complete walk-through of a calibration session. I found the entire tutorial (all six chapters) to be extremely informative and thorough. It's important to note that the disc also contains some additional test patterns which are available to users who wish to check sharpness or other common controls found on most televisions. The software does not directly interface with these controls except to point out what they are and the patterns which can be used to make adjustments.

The Calibration Process

After installing the software and letting Windows XP install drivers for the Spyder colorimeter, I proceeded to launch the application and undergo the full SpyderTV calibration process. Under the first section, "Record Your Settings" I entered the basic settings for the television, including current, minimum and maximum values for black level (brightness), white level (contrast), tint, saturation and color temperature. You can also edit the color temperature choices to more exactly reflect the ones on your set (high, medium, low vs. cool, medium, warm). If your television set does not have a particular parameter or function, you can simply uncheck the box next to that feature and SpyderTV will gray it out and eliminate it from the testing.



To go through the testing and calibration process you merely select the test pattern on the DVD and then tell the application to take a reading. You do this for all of the settings and follow the instructions on the PC or laptop. The basic order of the testing process is:

- Initial readings of settings (Brightness & Contrast)
- Color Temperature
- Black Level (Brightness)
- White Level (Contrast)
- Saturation (Color)
- Tint
- Evaluation and Reporting

Throughout the testing process, SpyderTV is attempting to understand the minimum and maximum values and settings before making adjustments. In this way, it goes back and forth to arrive at what it feels is the best setting for the particular parameter. Each setting goes through about 7 steps to accomplish this, two max extreme setting evaluations and a 5-step ping-pong approach to narrow the gap down to the ideal value.

During the Black Level test I noticed that the software seemed not to realize it was asking for the same setting twice. As I mentioned, it typically takes a maximum, minimum and middle reading, followed by various readings at recommended points in between as it zeroes in on the optimal value. I found the unit asking for a measurement at "0" (its recommendation) directly following a previous "0" measurement... This actually happened 4 times in a row (requiring 4 measurements of the same parameter) before the system moved on. At one point the system was even prompted to ask me if I was making the requested changes. After consulting with Mark Hunter of Datacolor I was made aware that due to certain conditions, such as a plasma TV that suffers from temporary burn-in or a television set that hasn't sufficiently warmed up, the system will make repeated adjustments at times in order to ensure that a set is ready to move forward. It is possible that perhaps the unusual nature of this LCD television's black levels caused the issue.

[Continue to Results, Reporting and Conclusions](#)

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Datacolor SpyderTV Results, Reporting and Conclusions

The Results

Results were positive, though on the LCD [television](#) I currently have in-house, I was not terribly impressed by the black level capability. Apparently, SpyderTV wasn't either, as it made no significant adjustments and the set still has difficulty showing a great amount of detail in dark picture areas. Here is a peek at the "Before and After" photos supplied by the SpyderTV DVD:

Before



After



I realize it's hard to tell from some of these pictures (and taking a "direct-on" shot with an LCD camera to an [LCD screen](#) resulted in a

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wonderful effect I like to call "Rainbow-Vision"), but the SpyderTV system really did an amazing job at correcting white levels. Skin tones lost an almost bluish tinge and whites took on a warmer tone (though watching it I though maybe a bit too warm.) Black levels, as I mentioned, remained a problem, though the bluish tinge was removed – and you cannot expect the SpyderTV to compensate for inherent difficulties encountered by a particular television.

Summary Reporting

The entire user calibration process took me 26 minutes and 5 seconds according to the Summary Report. You can print or create a PDF of the report for later reference.

At first, the summary charts didn't seem to mean much of anything, having two axes labeled "Slider Value" and Activation". After speaking with Datacolor about this, I realized that I was perhaps "looking at the moon with a microscope". Taking another pass I could see that the *Color Setting Graph* quite simply showed the Color adjustment potential vs. the slider value range. The Proton LCD TV I was using limited the adjustability of the Color control (this is good, actually) meaning that while I had a more steep adjustment range (i.e. all settings higher than -12 do virtually nothing) I was actually able to get pretty close to the target setting.

The *Color Temperature Pre-set Setting Graph* was nice in that it showed a target with all three settings represented. While an actual color temperature reading would be a welcome "educational" addition, most should find it helpful in showing (quite simply and clearly) that there was an improvement. Black and white luminance values were also shown at the end. According to SpyderTV the final ANSI contrast ratio for this set was 296:1 (black luminance level / white luminance level).

At this point the calibration session was completed. Should you want to calibrate another television, simply begin again and the SpyderTV system allows you to enter in new information for another TV set. Unfortunately, if you need to go back to a previous television, you'll need to re-enter all of the "Record Your Settings" info again. We're hoping that a software update will be released in the near future to allow users to store multiple display settings.

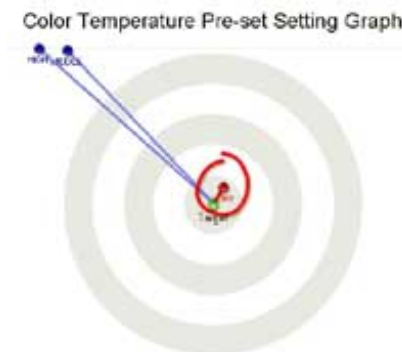
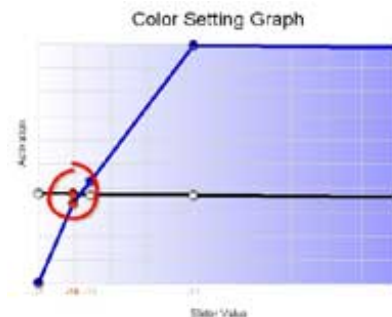
Conclusion

For the price of a TV stand (or a short esoteric component video cable) you can make your TV really shine. To spend thousands of dollars on a high definition television set and then live with the default factory settings should be a crime. The difference between a well-calibrated television and an oversaturated, blue-tinged torch is simply amazing for those who have never seen it. While a professional calibrator can do even more for you due to a wealth of additional controls available in the service menus, many will be satisfied to know that they can buy a single product that can be used to perform basic user calibrations on *all* the television sets in a home and be kept handy for whenever a new product such as a DVD player is added into the system. Now, if only the SpyderTV owners would rise up and take their colorimeters into the local consumer electronics chain store...

The Score Card

The scoring below is based on each piece of equipment doing the duty it is designed for. The numbers are weighed heavily with respect to the individual cost of each unit, thus giving a rating equal to:

$$\text{Performance} \times \text{Price Factor/Value} = \text{Rating}$$



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Audioholics Rating Scale:

-  - Outstanding (reserved for features or areas that exceed market norms)
-  - Above Average
-  - Average
-  - Below Average
-  - Very Poor

Datacolor SpyderTV

Metric	Rating
Style & Design	
Compatibility	
Features	
Ergonomics (usability)	
Overall	
Value	

**Datacolor SpyderTV
MSRP: \$269**

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<http://www.datacolor.com>

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About Datacolor

Founded in 1970 and headquartered in Lawrenceville, NJ, USA, Datacolor is a global leader in color management and color communications technology. Datacolor initially developed solutions for industrial color problems, and then expanded its product offering to include color communication and digital imaging solutions. Today Datacolor SPECTRUM™ provides an integrated suite of software products, measuring systems, and supporting services that provide centralized control of the entire color management process worldwide.

ColorVision, a unit of Datacolor, is dedicated to providing affordable, simple-to-use color matching tools to creative professionals, digital photographers, and consumers. We offer award winning products for monitor calibration, printer calibration, and ICC profile