

Samsung's new 83-inch TV could be a harbinger of consumer confusion

Enlarge / A promotional image for the new 83-inch S90C Samsung OLED TV.

reader comments

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Samsung is about to begin selling its first TVs with OLED panels made by rival LG after months of negotiations. Unfortunately, the way the TVs that come out of this deal are branded and marketed could cause confusion for consumers who want the most bang for their buck.

On Tuesday, Samsung published a blog post revealing a new 83-inch TV that lives in the company's existing S90C range of high-end OLEDs. In truth, the set had been leaked weeks earlier, when excellently obsessive and detail-oriented TV expert Vincent Teoh of HDTV Test was quick to observe that Samsung does not currently make 83-inch panels itself—meaning this must be the first TV in Samsung's deal with LG.

The complicated story behind Samsung's new OLEDs

The Samsung-LG deal was rumored in fits and starts for months. As LG made and shipped OLED TVs and panels and talked up the benefits of OLED compared to good-old LED LCD, Samsung stuck to shipping LCD TVs, introducing new technologies to try to

keep the older technology competitive.

However, Samsung recently found itself in a difficult position as Chinese makers of the LCD panels critical to Samsung's TV lineup charged higher and higher prices. That, in tandem with LG's successes in turning public opinion about high-end TVs toward OLED, led to Samsung adopting OLED tech in some of its high-end TVs after all.

Samsung only produces OLED TV panels in 55-, 65-, and 77-inch sizes, whereas LG has been making larger ones for a while. Super-huge TVs are one of the fastest-growing market segments, and many consumers who want to buy one also want to ensure they get the best picture quality possible.

The Samsung chaebol has deep ties to the South Korean government, so government officials reportedly arranged meetings between Samsung and LG (which is also a South Korean company) so LG could supply larger panels to Samsung to keep the giant competitive. After some hiccups, the two companies came to an agreement wherein LG would supply Samsung with 77- and 83-inch panels.

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The introduction of yet another Samsung TV size in an existing line wouldn't normally command much attention here, but there are two reasons this deserves a close look.

First are the industry implications of the aforementioned Samsung-LG deal, which sure seems to seal the deal that high-end TVs will generally be OLEDs for the immediate future, settling LCDs in the lower and mid tiers (where it frankly belongs at this point). Related to that, there's the side point that Samsung has been publicly critical about both OLED and LG's specific implementation of it for ages, only to now cheerfully start selling the exact same thing it has been criticizing.

Second is the fact that LG's panels are built with a different

technology and subpixel arrangement than Samsung's existing OLED TVs, potentially sowing confusion for consumers.

Sub-pixel arrangements and consumer confusion

Samsung's existing 55-, 65-, and 77-inch TVs in the S90C line all use QD-OLED, a relatively new OLED tech that promises better color at high brightness and (in theory, at least) longer panel life with lower burn-in risk. LG's panels use WRGB, which in some specific cases may offer higher overall brightness, but which otherwise could be considered a little bit lower-end.

The new 83-inch S90C uses WRGB, whereas the other three sizes currently use QD-OLED. To make matters more confusing, LG's deal with Samsung also included 77-inch panels, which could mean that consumers could face a panel lottery in the 77-inch size in the future—that is, they might not know which technology they're getting when they buy.

That's speculation, of course, given that only the 83-inch model has been announced so far, and we know that one's WRGB. But it's something to watch because Samsung has thus far been opaque about which OLED tech it's using. All the TVs discussed here are simply marketed as "OLED." Samsung is not creating separate product lines for these two-panel types, so even if all 83-inch TVs in the line use WRGB and all 55-inch ones use QD-OLED, most consumers won't know that unless they do some digging on enthusiast sites like Rtings or HDTV Test. They'll assume that they're getting essentially the same picture quality and performance regardless of size, and that won't necessarily be the case.

Samsung 83" Class S90C OLED 4K Smart TV

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HDTV Test's Vincent Teoh noted in a video that there are a couple easy ways to check which panel tech is used if you have the TV in front of you. You can take a zoomed-in photo of a bright image on the TV and look at the subpixel arrangement. If it has a triangular shape distinctive to QD-OLEDs, you know it's, well, QD-OLED. If it doesn't, it's WRGB. Alternatively, you can shine a bright light on the screen when it's turned off. If it shifts to gray, it's QD-OLED. If not, it's WRGB.

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But most people order their TVs online sight unseen at this point, so that won't help everyone. So if you're in the market for a large OLED TV and you're considering the world's most popular brand as you shop, make sure to do some extra research—because Samsung's marketing spin won't necessarily tell you everything you need to know to make the best choice.

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