

Video streaming device leader Roku debuts new soundbar, player and Roku Channel app

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The newest Roku products include a streaming device promising improved video delivery throughout the home, a smaller soundbar that also streams, and an updated mobile app for viewing on the go.

The nation's leading streaming platform, Roku said it had about 43 million monthly active accounts at the end of June 2020. Research firm eMarketer estimates Roku captures about 33% of U.S. internet users and 47% of connected TV users.

Roku's lineup of devices includes the Roku Express (\$29.99) and Roku Streaming Stick (\$49.99). But its marquee standalone player—it also markets Roku TVs with built-in streaming capability—is the Roku Ultra (\$99.99).

The updated model, available for pre-order today at Roku.com, is engineered for faster channel launches and video starts and has an improved antenna for 50% more wireless range, says Mark Ely, Roku's vice president for retail product strategy.

"The more and more homes get congested with Wi-Fi devices, the harder it is to have a really good stable signal. A better antenna makes a big difference and that means less buffering (and) you can get further from the router and you can just have a better experience."

The Roku Ultra, which comes with an enhanced voice remote, headphones and high speed HDMI cable, also supports Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos surround sound. You can also pair a phone or tablet to the Ultra using Bluetooth to stream audio content.

Last year, Roku brought to market its first soundbar with built-in streaming and a compatible subwoofer. Those speakers would also work with the surround speakers Roku began selling in 2018.

Now, there's a smaller soundbar, the Roku Streambar, on the way. The Streambar (\$129.99) has four built-in speakers and delivers Dolby Audio. In addition to having Roku net video streaming built-in, the Streambar also lets you connect via Bluetooth to stream music from

mobile devices and Roku's Spotify Connect feature.

The 14-inch wide Streambar's two front speakers are designed to deliver clear dialogue, while the two side speakers "really send the sound out around the room," Ely said. "It really sounds much bigger than it looks."

The Roku Streambar is also available for pre-order at Roku.com and, like the Ultra, is expected to ship in October.

In other Roku developments, an upcoming operating system update (Roku OS 9.4) will let users of Apple computers, iPhones and iPads send content to their Roku player or Roku TV using AirPlay 2. Upcoming Apple HomeKit support will allow customers to ask Siri to use their voice to control Roku devices. (You can already use Amazon Alexa or Google Assistant to control Roku devices.)

And a new Roku Channel app will let anyone watch free content on mobile devices. Roku users who have subscribed to premium channels on the platform can also watch those on the go.

Last week, Roku and Comcast reached a deal to bring NBCUniversal's streaming channel Peacock to Roku devices. A free advertising-supported service, Peacock launched in July with TV shows such as "Law & Order" and "Downton Abbey" and movies including "Zombieland." You can pay more \$4.99 for next-day access to some NBC shows, Premier League soccer and original Peacock series and \$5 more for ad-free viewing, too.

That agreement, which avoided NBCUniversal pulling its other apps from Roku, "helps cement their (Roku's) position as a key streaming gatekeeper into the future," said Michael Nathanson, co-founder and senior research analyst at media research firm MoffettNathan, in a note to investors last week.

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