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APC's H15 home theater power conditioner

A must have device for any home theater **By Robert Jensen**

By providing steady, clean, power to your home theater components APC's H15 gives improved audio and video, protection from damaging spikes and brownouts, plus extends the life of your TV/monitor.



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People everywhere are installing home theaters in their homes. This movement was created by large screen LCD and plasma displays becoming much less expensive over the past several years as well as high definition content now being broadcast to our livingrooms. We are bombarded with ever increasing, ever improving, multimedia - DVD, HD, Blu-Ray, HD Radio, satellite radio, cable TV, satellite TV. Screen sizes continue to grow and can now fill the entire wall of the living room. We have audiophile quality multi-channel sound and high definition video quality as the norm but are we getting the most we can out of our fancy equipment?

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That's where the power conditioner comes in. American Power Conversion Corp's (APC) H Type AV Power Conditioner is designed to not only deliver pure, stable AC power, which can improve the both audio and video signal of your multimedia equipment. It can protect your investment in electronics from power surges too. In addition, because your display is receiving consistently clean and steady voltage it will last longer.

How does it work? Normally the electrical power supplied to your home is subjected to all sorts of outside influences such as varying peaks and valleys (brown outs) caused by demand on the country's power grid. Once it enters your home there are also negative influences. Every time your refrigerator turns on there is a dip in the line voltage, the same goes for other power hungry devices like your air conditioner. Then there is the noise that can enter the line caused by your appliances, refrigerator compressors, washing machine motors, even light dimmers.

A perfect example of this used to happen when my dad would go on one of his weekend home improvement jags and break out the power tools. I'd be watching TV when everything would go snowy and an awful whine would blast out of the TV's speaker caused from interference generated by the electric drill my dad was using. It also happened whenever one of my sisters were using their hairdryer. That same sort of noise is generated by all sorts of things around the house, like your computer.

This interference can take the form of obvious audible/visual degradation (static/whine) all the way down to subtle degradation causing an edginess to what should be a natural sounding music or minor artifacts in your video.

Normally for a review I'd request a review unit from the manufacturer. Not in this case. I recently bought the H15 and after living with it for a month I decided I should spread the word about this great device.



The H15 also comes in a black finish

In the box

First off, at 16.7 lbs. the H15 is built like a piece of military gear, meaning its one solid piece of electronics. The unit is available in both black and silvery gray and 1000VA and 1500VA models. I went for the 1500VA (1440 Watts continuous) model for the extra headroom it gave me to plug in power hungry electronics.

Also in the box are a very heavy duty power cord, 2 coax cables with gold plated connectors, a telephone cable, 2 brackets for rack mounting the unit, a sheet of audio/video labels to help identify all your connectors/cables, a manual (nice touch), warranty (5 years), and equipment protection policy so that if the H15 were to somehow be overwhelmed (say by a lighting strike) replace their unit and repair or reimburse the owner for the fair market value of the damaged equipment, up to \$750,000US.

Front

The front panel is simply laid out with a center LCD display surrounded by 8 LEDs (blue,yellow,red), three pushbuttons (Power, Setup and Select) and that's it. Using the Setup and Select buttons the LCD will cycle to

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display line voltage in/out, frequency, and load. You also use them to change delay time to power off, language, and LCD brightness/off. Surrounding the LCD are LED indicator lights that normally shine blue to show everything is ok, yellow to indicate the H15 is operating during a dip/spike in the power or red to indicate a problem in the home's wiring (missing ground/overloaded neutral/reverse polarity).



The front dimensions of the H15 match other components in my system and there are some similar styling cues between it and my Motorola DCT3416 DVR-cable box.



Rear

The rear of the H15 features 12 surge protected and grounded power outlets. The top 6 of those are labeled CD, DVD, DVR, CATV/SAT, Monitor, AUX and marked as being 'Digital Filter'. Below them are another 6 protected outlets split into groups of two labeled 'Video Filter' (TV, VCR), 'Analog Filter' (Tuner/AUX, Preamp/RCVR), and 'High Current Filter/Delayed' (Subwoofer, Amplifier). Now, don't take those labels as the final word on what you plug into them. All of them give you surge protection, voltage regulation and noise filtering. The only exception are the two 'Delayed' outlets and even there you can set them to behave like the other outlets if you don't need the delay function.

Next to the outlets are five gold plated, low insertion loss, coax/RF type connectors that are also surge protected. The three along the top are the input and two outputs for your 'CATV/Modem' (In, Out, Out). Below that are two connectors labeled 'SAT/antenna' (In, Out).

Next is a gold plated 'System Ground' terminal where you will attach the ground wire from all the electronics plugged into the H15. This will help prevent ground loops that cause audible hum. (Hum is a bad thing and so are the tiny shocks an ungrounded device can give you)

To the right of the ground terminal is the 'Circuit Breaker' push button (reset). You'll use this in the event that the H15's circuit breaker trips (preventing damage to your electronics). One word of caution when you reset the breaker, give it a quick push and then release it. Don't hold it in or you can cause some damage. This is the only weak point in what I consider an exceptionally well designed unit. Maybe they need some sort of a cover with a warning label attached to it?

Below the breaker are jacks (surge protected of course) labeled 'Tel/DVR/SAT/DSL' (In, Out, Out). You plug in the incoming telephone line (In). Some DVRs, satellite dishes 'call home' for billing and programming purposes so your (Out) jacks will attach to those or your DSL or regular modem.

Finally we come to the last two jacks labeled 'DC TRIGGER' (In, Out). You'll probably use this to turn on and off your sub-woofer if it supports the feature.

Speaking of subwoofers. . . there can sometimes be problems with the amplifier designs used in a few subwoofers causing the speaker's fuse to blow when using the H15. If that happens contact APC for a possible workaround or plug it into a different power solution (strip/conditioner/etc).

In Use

What can I say, I bought one (on sale) and then thought enough of it I wanted to spread the good word. The APC H15 looks good in either its silvery gray or black finish, its simple to set up with plenty of versatility and you can fine tune it to your needs.

Short of asking Zeus to call down some lightning bolts to test its surge protection feature, it works. I've had several instances of brownouts this summer and when it happened the H15 gave a small click and flash of a yellow LED and that was the only sign it was doing its job. No flickering of my monitor or audible effect coming out of my speakers when the airconditioner or fridge switched on and off (all the lights in the house dim when that happens).

Its harder to test the effects line noise can create but I came up with this idea. It's a little overkill but it makes the point. I pulled out an old hair dryer (which hasn't been used in decades since I lost most of my hair). I tested using a standard FM radio, 720p monitor, and my two year old Pioneer A/V receiver.

For the first series of tests I simply plugged the units into a standard wall socket, then did a second test using the H15. The most noticeable test was with the FM radio. Plugged into the wall you could hear an obvious whine and static when the dryer was switched on. Once I plugged the unit (Logitech Audio Station) into the APC H15 the whine and static were completely gone. With the video monitor things were a bit more subtle with a slight herringbone pattern visible primarily in the shadow area of the picture whenever I turned the hairdryer on and moved it around the cables carrying the TV signal (this simulates noise from your power cables causing noise in your video/audio signal, which is why you always try to have your A/V cables cross power cords at a 90° angle). This was much more apparent when I switched from cable to standard analog antenna.

Again, existing line noise can have subtle effects on your music and I did hear a slight improvement in listenability when I compared with various music sources using the APC H15 versus standard AC. I switched back and forth a few times to make sure I wasn't imagining things. It wasn't what I would call a big difference - I suppose the best description I could give you is a less tiring, more natural sound using the power conditioner. Unfortunately I don't have test equipment to measure if the improvements were caused by lack of, or lowering of, the noise floor, or more the electronics performing at their best because of having clean AC. Maybe its a combination of both.

The H15 retails for \$449.99US. You can find out more at www.apc.com



As you can see from the interior shot it's a clean and well thought out design and construction quality is top notch.

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Robert Jensen has spent most of his 55 years in photography, from the age of 11 when he got his first camera (a Kodak Instamatic) to the present, shooting professionally. From 1971 to 1997 he worked in retail selling photographic equipment to people of all skill levels. For most of that period he was also a manager.

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