SEEKING a world without the distracting effects of television, a San Francisco entrepreneur has invented a small device that can switch off almost any television set in a public place. The inventor, Mitch Altman, came up with the concept for the tiny gadget called TV-B-Gone while in a restaurant with friends some years ago.

Trying to hold a conversation they were distracted by the television in the corner.

The device works on the same principle as a universal remote control, but only turns televisions on or off.

It has with one button and sorts through roughly 200 infrared codes that control the power of about 1000 television models.

According to Altman, most televisions should react within 17 seconds, although it takes a little more than a minute for the device to emit all the trigger codes.

The TV-B-Gone went on sale this week and the company, Cornfield Electronics, has been swamped with orders as demand for the keyring-size device – which retails at $US15 ($20) – outstripped supply.

The website has crashed under the volume of inquiries from would-be buyers. "I thought there would just be a trickle, but we're swamped," he says.

Altman says the device is based on electrons. According to quantum mechanics, electrons only have some probability of existing, he says.

"No one really knows what this stuff is about," Altman says. "Yet throughout the past several decades people on our planet have used this model to create things that have drastically affected the world we live in – anything from nuclear weapons control systems to the ability to listen to ecstatically beautiful music anywhere, anytime at the push of a button."

He has not owned a television in 24 years. "There's just so little time in our lives," he says. "Why should we spend so much time on something we don't necessarily enjoy?"

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