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Revealing The “Magic” Of AV

Simplicity comes at a cost, but it can also create opportunities.

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By Thom Mullins

AFTER READING Daniel Frankel's article, “Oversimplified AV,” in the August issue of *Pro AV* magazine (see page 74), I responded in my usual polysyllabic way — “A-yeah.” There is a lot of truth to what he says. Not just a lot of truth, but a lot of truths. There were so many viewpoints it was difficult to ascertain what the true impact might be to our industry. If necessity is the mother of invention, then laziness or simplicity or ease of use is its father. It is the union of these desires that has landed us in the middle of this conversation — one that has been going on since the inception of our industry.

Since the first garage door opener was modified to control a slide projector, our industry has been on a quest to make equipment and systems easier to use. In the process, whole new aspects of our industry have been started, grown, and matured; entirely new revenue streams have been created. The current strain of “simplification” will lead to new opportunities for manufacturers, integrators, owners, and consultants. This is an inevitable progression — indeed a response — to the needs of the user. But what, if anything, does all of this mean for the consultant and our work?

One item that has hindered the growth of the AV industry is the inability of the average person to understand and proficiently use an audiovisual presentation system to achieve their goals. Time and again, I have seen widespread acceptance of AV systems stymied by a complicated and poorly designed control system. In the minds of many users, the control system is “The System.” If the control system doesn't work as expected or needed, the first response is usually “The system doesn't work.”

While all other aspects of The System might actually work quite well individually or together, the inability to do its job is a stumbling block the user cannot overcome. Sure, there is a lot of cool factor associated with such systems, but if the control system is not well designed or implemented, it doesn't last past the first button push.

It is that very fact that has driven the development of such technologies as Cloud Systems, Calypso Controls, SP Controls, Xantech, or Aurora Multimedia. That is in addition to what AMX and Crestron are trying to do with their systems. It is, after all, what much of our industry is built upon: The desire to keep things as simple as possible.

This desire even extends to such technologies as Mitsubishi's projector calibration device and NEC's Screen Reform technologies. All of these have been developed in response to market needs expressed by end users or integrators. We are seeing, to some degree, a stratification in the controls industry. Not every system needs a touch panel and all the complex programming that goes behind it. The variety of simpler control systems out there is a direct response to these needs. That said, we should also understand Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." While this was directly related to writing science fiction, it could also be said to apply to writing code, whether for control systems or digital signal processors. In the minds of some, there may not be much difference between the two. The corollary is that for both magic and advanced technology, there is a cost. In other words, the cost to get to simplicity is sometimes inversely proportional to the appearance of ease.

This creates new opportunities for consultants, as well as for contractors and manufacturers. While the quest for simplicity may mean a reduction in some kinds of work, it will open up new opportunities for us to serve our clients. As AV systems and their controllers become more widely accepted at home and at the office, the number of systems deployed will grow. Primarily, this will lead to a need for standardization of systems within the corporate environment. We can assist corporate users by analyzing their needs and helping them determine the appropriate size and complexity of their systems. In an effort to capture their share of the market, manufacturers will respond with systems to meet those needs. The integrator will still be involved in installation and customer support. As the systems become easier to deploy and use, more systems will be sold.

This also opens up opportunities in developing technology master plans for clients. Architects have been doing this kind of work for years in the built environment, particularly for higher education and municipalities. As corporations build their own corporate campuses, master planning is critical to their continued growth. The key is this: Rather than build haphazardly, begin to map out the issues of how, where, and when that growth will occur. It requires looking into the crystal ball and predicting where a company, university, or city is headed in the next few years. The same level of care is required for technology planning.

This helps clients plan where, when, and how they will have to spend their money on technology in the years to come. As the audiovisual industry continues to grow and touch more and other types of technology, this places us at or near the center of tremendous opportunities for growth. Because our systems touch so many aspects of the built environment, and we have to understand them, it places us in a unique position to help our clients understand the changes coming in the future with Building Information Management (BIM) systems, "green" technology, building controls, and information technology.

The big convergence, in my opinion, is not in running everything over a single cable or wiring infrastructure; it is the convergence of knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge for the benefit of our clients. Master planning is not something that is done once and then tossed away. Technology master plans require update and modification; they do not remain static. Our industry is one of most dynamic in today's marketplace; it will continue to be so into the foreseeable future, especially as we move into a convergent design and construction industry. As our industry proves its flexibility and capacity to adapt, the questions of simplicity of programming will fade into the background. New challenges will present themselves for solution.

These added levels of integration and complexity will demand the best from us — the best in knowledge and problem solving; the best in critical thinking and problem solving; the best in personnel, communications, and teamwork. New avenues will continue to open for the industry even as we respond to the market demands for systems that are easy to operate. We — manufacturers, contractors, integrators, and consultants — will adapt what we know to what we need to know and

do. Out of that will flow new simplifications and new markets — the cycle will repeat.

Are you ready?

FEEDBACK

<i>To comment on this article, e-mail the Pro AV editorial staff at proav@hanleywood.com.</i>

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