Mixing Sales and Design

Think about a very common public space, or "third place" as it has been coined: Starbucks versus Dunkin' Donuts. Both essentially are in the same business—selling coffee and complimentary sundries. One is decidedly a place designed to encourage lingering; couches, adeptly programmed music, and wireless Internet makes the Seattle guys' place somewhere you want to hang out. DD's design is perfect for a dash from the car for a cup of joe

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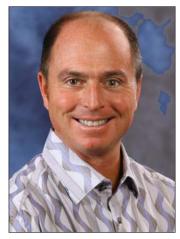
and back in record time. If you want to hang and read the paper, you're at a hard-surface counter with seating that makes you want to leave after just a few minutes.

Whether or not you like it or are aware of it, someone designed the space you are in right now. We all have particular senses and preferences for color, convenience, and

other creature comforts that we notice. When it comes to selling residential technology, you can also make personalization a central part of how you design systems for your clients. However, it should be more than personalizing touch screens to spec and customizing GUI skins. You should encourage your clients to think about décor and design goals for their home and how you, as a professional who has been in many nice homes, can help.

Design is functional in terms of how a product or space performs. Design can also evoke emotion, a connection with a thing or space. In our line of work, we install cool products into spaces. How do you determine how the products can complement the space? Do you think about the client's furnishings, either existing or in their future de-

sign plans? Most people like to see at least a little bit of their A/V gear other than the obvious display panels and touchscreens, and they have learned to tolerate flush-mount speakers. So, are you working with a cabinet designer to provide great placement of the client's A/V gear? Have you checked out the nearest Ethan Allen store to see what they are up to with furnishings, colors and, gasp, A/V furniture?

Are you installing lighting? If no, why not? You need to do it and learn to get good at it, or establish a good relationship with a lighting designer and/or electrician who can complement your work. Lighting is a very powerful ingredient in stimulating our senses and influences how we perceive a space. You should know basic concepts of lighting design, such as luminance coverage and what types of lighting fixtures are available.

It is critical to know your client's unique preferences, before personalizing their space. How do they live or want to live in their home? What activities do they typically engage in at home? Where do they like to be when not at home? Where do they buy their furniture? What kind of re-

tail stores or spaces do they enjoy? Have you asked them about the homes of their friends and relatives to find out what they like (and don't like) about some of those homes?

You have a huge amount of design input by virtue of your role as installer of plasmas and projector screens in the room. You can help your client create a great experience if you propose different scenarios for the space. Consider the patterns of natural daylight in that room, how furniture placement responds to the light patterns, and vice versa. Think about offering window treatments, not only as functional lighting controls, but also as an enhancement to the room's décor.

Seating is central to good space design and plays an enormous role in how interaction with the technology will take place. Theater seating of course, is your sale for the taking, but what about working with furniture designers for other rooms? A great loveseat in front of a plasma

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M A N A G E M E N T   M O D U L E

McCormick Systems Offers ABS Line of Software

McCormick Systems' ABS line of estimation software is aimed toward datacom contractors, security dealers, and installers of low-voltage building systems. The company offers ABS 3000, 6000, 8000, and 12000 software, with these options going from the simplest version (ABS3000) through to a networkable, multiuser version which enables several

estimators to work simultaneously on a given estimate (ABS12000). "In our research, we were surprised to find that many ABS [automated building systems] contractors use spreadsheets, and even paper, to do their estimates," company president Todd McCormick said. "Our software isn't hard to learn and offers flexibility and capabilities that estimators who are using paper—or even spreadsheets—can't imagine."

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going beyond the traditional RGB color breakdown is something that has been demonstrated for both micro display projection and LCD direct view panels by Genoa Color Technologies, an Israeli semiconductor company that offers RGBY- and RGBYC-based solutions for multiple chip micro display projectors and similar technology that could be integrated with direct view displays by adding either yellow and both yellow and cyan sub-pixels to an LCD panel.

For the moment the real key remains no different than our traditional mantra: be able to explain what you have today and why it will serve the client well in the long term, while at the same time keeping a watchful eye out for what is approaching, and when it will logically reach the market coupled with an understanding of how they compete with what you have now and what your competitors' lines offer today. If the equation doesn't work out for the latter, be prepared to ask your current vendors to defend their technology from a price/benefit/competitive view standpoint, and, without threatening, be ready to change vendors or at least add another line if that seems to be the right decision.

Not all new technologies are disruptive, and not all disruptive technologies are new. They can put you out of business if you bet too heavily on the wrong one, but hedging your bets isn't such a bad idea, as the few people who still sell CRT-based front projectors will testify. Having gotten through the technology side of the display world, the next step is to see how all of this settles down into near-term products for this fall.

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or an awesome recliner next to the classic Eileen Gray adjustable table in the reading room along with a pair of incredible speakers should be your sale. If you design the entertainment experience, find a way to design the total space. Work with a local fine furniture business for mutual referrals. Make friends with local interior designers.

Residential system contractors need to learn more about home design elements beyond the A/V gear. The amount of hours that you spend every day in people's homes is an incredible education in itself. If you were to be exposed to more design, furnishing, lighting, and space planning knowledge, you could enhance your value proposition to your clients.

More design and architecture courses are being taught at industry events than ever before. Seek out these courses, expert panels, and seminars. Reach out to the local chapters of AIA and ASID. Check out fine furniture shows and local home shows that cater to upscale clients.

You should also think about seeking out tradeshows and conferences on interior design and furnishings. In addition to good networking, you will be immersed in a creative environment. Soak it up. I've recently learned of the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (www.icff.com), which takes place in New York City on May 20-23. I understand it to be an event and place for creative thinking about how to enhance people's homes through innovative furniture and lighting and more. How cool to know about this stuff and A/V! For great listings of related trade shows, visit www.threehands.com. And, for all things concerning home architecture, www.architecture.about.com is a good starting point.

Remember that you are a residential systems contractor working in people's homes, designing an experience for them by providing a professional service. You're an expert. So, go learn something new and then get out there and sell it.

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or Homeseer integrator, what do you do? All of these companies offer great products that have been shipping and reliably installed, in some cases, for decades. The word "reliable" is critical in this last sentence as there still exists a great deal of uncertainty that a Windows-based control system will have the reliability that a custom integrator demands to run a successful, long-term business. The jury is still out and undecided on this critical, potential "show-stopper" issue.

So the real question becomes, do you want to wait until that jury comes back with its decision (by then you may be too late to get in the game) or do you want to be part of that jury and make your own decision? I would strongly endorse the latter tack, and I think you'll find that most of the larger CEDIA custom electronic integrators are doing the same. They are staying the course with the companies and systems that brought them the success and status that they enjoy today, but they have a Media Center being tested somewhere in their office or a principal's home to best determine when it's ready for primetime. HP's presence at this year's EHX was a clear signal that primetime may not be as far away as you might think.