

The accidental hero

Paul Helliar, who admits to developing a custom installation business “almost without knowing it”, discusses current and future technology trends, and the importance of London’s CEDIA Expo



Q: What is your background in custom installation?

A: All through school and college I was a total av nut, messing about with technology in my spare time and then taking holiday jobs and work experience in av stores at every opportunity. It was a completely natural step then to join D&T Electronics in 1986. They were already a well-established av company, known primarily for the strength of their high-end rental and retail sales business.

Pretty much from when I started with D&T we began developing a custom installation business, almost without even knowing it. More and more of our customers simply began asking us to design and install the systems that we were providing to suit their own particular homes and lifestyles. Like many companies in the sector, we followed this growth market, gradually moving away from rental.

We took the decision to close our retail operations

comeback. At the moment, compression is king. But easier access to music around the home will also have an impact in raising the audio quality bar as well.

Exterior systems are also going to be increasingly important. Custom installation companies who can provide av, lighting, watering and other al fresco electronic systems to help their clients make the most of their gardens, patios, outdoor kitchen / barbecue and spa areas will be increasingly successful in the years ahead.

Q: How long have you been involved with CEDIA?

A: D&T Electronics was a founder member of CEDIA back in 1996. I even remember attending early CEDIA Board meetings held in a pub on the Kings Road. How times have changed! I joined the Board in 2004, and was re-elected in 2006 to serve on the CEDIA Expo committee.

‘We believe high-quality audio will make a comeback, even though, at the moment, compression is king’

completely around six years ago to focus exclusively on custom installation, covering everything from multi-room hi-fi and home cinema systems to integrated lighting control and whole house automation. Today, we have an office in London which I manage and another in Manchester which is run by my twin brother, Mark.

Q: What technologies are currently driving the market?

A: One of the biggest technologies for the custom install sector at the moment is media servers. They give us a fantastic opportunity to improve DVD movie and music enjoyment for our clients, and take out a lot of the clutter from their living space at the same time. They’re a perfect product for custom installers.

Recent advances in signal distribution, matrix and switching technology are also proving incredibly important. For those companies who really understand this area they provide a great route to designing and installing systems in large houses much more economically than before.

Q: What, in your view, will be the important technology in the years ahead?

A: High definition is obviously a significant development, and will become more important in the years ahead. With its growing influence and acceptance by consumers, we expect to see a renaissance in large screen technology, and at the same time, a revival in the popularity of superb quality, home projection systems. These developments will really bring HD to life!

We also predict that high quality audio will make a

Q: What is the CEDIA Expo committee and how does it work?

A: The CEDIA Expo committee is a combination of CEDIA trade supplier members and Electronic Systems Professional (ESP) members who visit the CEDIA Expo. Our job is to help make sure that the event continues to work for both parties, so we provide informed input, advice and direction to the CEDIA Expo organising team at Head Office. We meet regularly to discuss issues around the event, and report to the main CEDIA Board through myself and Stuart Tickle of AWE Europe. Stuart is Trade Supplier Expo Chair and I am ESP Expo Chair.

Q: Why should a design and installation company visit CEDIA Expo?

A: CEDIA Expo is Europe’s top dedicated product showcase, networking and training event for the CI sector. Nowhere else can custom installation companies get to see 90-95% of all the manufacturers and distributors connected to the industry in one place. That on its own makes a visit to CEDIA Expo essential if you want to stay up to speed with what’s new. Having this kind of knowledge is, after all, one of the key reasons why clients want to use the services of a custom installation company in the first place.

CEDIA Expo is also a great environment to meet your peers from the UK and across Europe. Over the years I’ve really valued the opportunity to compare experiences, share ideas and learn from others in the industry and from other territories where business is done differently.

And then, of course, there’s the training. The CEDIA Expo

provides an excellent career path-focused education programme. For me as a pretty experienced business owner there are some really valuable courses, and there are also plenty of options for my staff. CEDIA Certification is important now, and will be even more valuable in the future. So it’s vital that staff take full advantage of the CEU accredited courses which CEDIA and many of the manufacturers now offer at the Expo. The Education programme also gives employees the chance to sit the relevant Designer and Installer examinations to achieve certified status as well.

Our employees really value the chance to learn new skills and benchmark themselves against others through the CEDIA Expo education programme. We also find they come back to work full of knowledge, enthusiasm and ideas which benefit the whole company.

Q: Last year was the first time CEDIA Expo took place at ExCeL London. How did it go and what’s in store for 2007?

A: Well, I thought it worked pretty well for a London debut. The venue was brilliant. It was much easier to navigate than the ICC in Birmingham, and the quality of the exhibition stands was really impressive too. The education programme also worked well. And with more than 6,000 visitors it was substantially bigger and better than any previous CEDIA UK Expo.

That said, there’s always room for improvement. Over 15% more floor space, bigger aisles and improvements in the build-up and break-down times will help ease things for exhibitors. And without any conflict from the World Cup, the Chairman’s reception and CEDIA Party are also set, once again, to be the central social occasions of the event, rather than watching England versus Sweden or Holland against Argentina!

Better synchronization of the education programme with timings on the show floor is also on the agenda. This will help ensure that delegates get every chance to make the most of their time at the event, both in courses and on the show floor.

We’re also keen to encourage custom installation companies to bring along their architect and interior design contacts to the show. Both the Royal Institute of British Architects and the British Interior Design Association are supporting CEDIA Expo 2007, and will be actively promoting the event to their members because of the growing synergies between our industry and theirs. CEDIA Expo is a great place for design professionals to see the technology close up, and in doing so, value the skills and professionalism of the custom installer much, much more. ■■

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