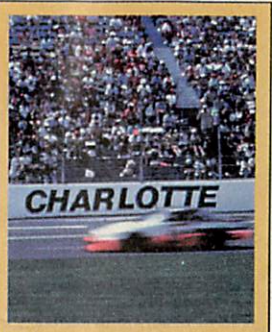


SYSTEMS Contractor News



Expectations Vary at Expo '97

■ Many Contractors Look to NSCA for Innovative Technologies

CHARLOTTE, NC—Perhaps reflecting the boom in virtually every market segment of systems contracting, contractors and consultants are attending this year's NSCA Expo with differing expectations. According to some, such as Bob Thompson, president of Northern Electronic Technology Systems in Minneapolis, MN, the heart of their anticipation is still

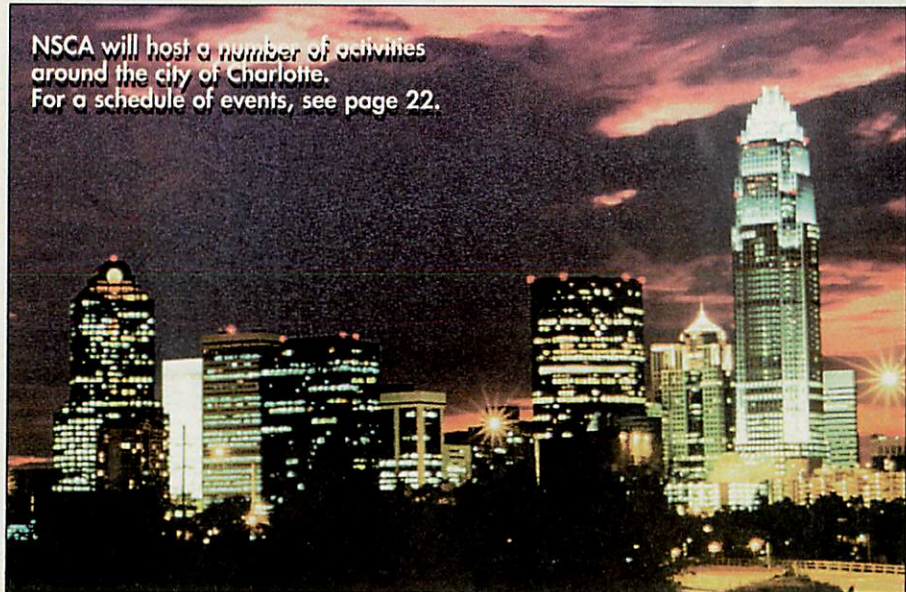
the simple desire to see "new and innovative things."

Robin Crews, president of Crews and Associates in San Antonio, TX, added that leading-edge products have always been at the heart of the NSCA show. "It is not just from the big companies, but what is being developed by the companies coming up, where you often see some of the real cutting-

edge technology," he said.

All things change over time, and the NSCA show is no exception. "The change that I've noticed most prominently at the show is the addition of more educational programming," said Thompson, who has attended almost all of the last ten NSCA conventions. "And the

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NSCA will host a number of activities around the city of Charlotte. For a schedule of events, see page 22.

Low-Voltage Specifications Generate Frustration

by Barry McKinnon

The inclusion of low-voltage communications, security and alarm systems under Division 16 specifications is continuing to generate more frustration in the systems contracting industry as the technologies become more advanced and specialize.

alternating current cousins. From the point of view of the owner or project manager, these problems are often not readily apparent. The wire connection—the one common thread that runs through all modern electronic systems—is all they see. By keeping all the wire-related equipment under one division, the owner or project manager believes that all coordination and contract management will be neatly handled, meaning one less management headache for them to deal with. But from the point of view of most of the systems contracting industry, this umbrella approach generates new coordination headaches, and often introduces unpleasant new business practices to the process of securing contract jobs.

There are several issues here. Some are on the design side, some are on the contractor side and the remainder are on the owner's side. All these issues carry equal

weight—but let's start with the design-side of the equation.

1. Many electrical engineering firms have a large and qualified staff to provide a

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NSCA EXHIBITOR GUIDE

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Systems Contracting Boom Continues

■ Industry Business Shows No Signs of Abatement in '97

by James Careless

Ask a dozen systems contractors how business is shaping up for 1997 and beyond, and chances are you will get the same answer from each of them: "Great!"

One in particular, Gerry Tacker, production coordinator at Hoovers Audio Visual in Kansas City, MO, noted that much of the increased business can be attributed to improvements in the U.S. economy and the proliferation of new technologies coming on line. "There is a big push for new sound systems that can handle digital, and for new projectors that can handle the high-resolution data images," he said.

One thing is certain, the boom is not con-

finned to any one sector of the market. Richard Bertrand, director of operations at ASC Technical Services' audio-visual and sound division in Richardson, TX, said that his company is "just swimming with work" right now, in many markets.

"We recently renovated the Cotton Bowl," he explained. "We're in the middle of renovating the Hyatt Regency hotel, and I'm sitting on ten contracts for different churches. I've been doing Christ United Methodist church here in Dallas, which is a big install. We've also got a lot of different school districts upgrading on an unprecedented scale. For instance, instead of using dis-

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Sharing Solutions With Your Clients

■ *Communicating with Customers During Crucial Project Design and Installation Stages*



by Steven J. Thorburn
THORBURN ASSOC. INC

The success of your work on a project is judged in part by how well your client's expectations have been met. Client expectations range from simply getting a system in and operational to being particularly impressed about its appearance, performance and increased revenue potential. Our challenge as system designers and integrators is to keep the client informed about the issues, decisions, and results of decisions that are made during a project's design and installation.

When working in the themed

entertainment or theater industry on location-based entertainment projects, installation issues are even more hectic than with a typical project. The number of subcontractors on a project can easily double or triple over a standard build-out. Not only are there the typical trades (mechanical, electrical, plumbing, drywall, carpet, etc.), there are new trades like projection vendors, scenic painters, flora and fauna vendors, and animatronics, to name a few.

Themed projects generally have a more complicated room finish schedule which often resembles a theater production rather than standard construction.

After the building is built and the electrical and mechanical equipment is in place, the finish installers start adding their elements to the room. There is always a rush at the end to get the facility up and operational.

Twenty-four hour workdays are typical at the end of a project. This is the only way that you can get that many trades in one location to get the "project" running. These solid deadlines are often the result of the marketing department planning a "Grand Opening" for an attraction. This commotion is where the client and their staff will start to hear and see their system in its rawest and most unadorned form.

With almost all projects, the client will have made a decision to leave something out, typically due to a budget constraint. Unless you keep reminding the client about the deletion, they may forget later on.

Now is also the time to emotionally sell and resell the system that was selected by the client. The designer and installation crew need to put a positive spin on what was decided upon and is being

but not until the third quarter of next year! Keeping the client informed at the beginning, middle and end of a project is one of the ways that you will be successful in keeping the client on your side.

One approach that works well is to sit down with the client and find out what the "big picture," "blue sky

The number of subcontractors on a project can easily double or triple over a standard build-out. Not only are there the typical trades (mechanical, electrical, plumbing, drywall, carpet, etc.), there are new trades like projection vendors, scenic painters, flora and fauna vendors, and animatronics, to name a few.

dream," or "ultimate goal" for entire the project is. Once all of the inputs, outputs, effects, monitors, systems and other issues are identified and documented, then you can start talking about the black boxes that are found in the middle.

Should the heart of the system be a switching router, DSP, or straight unprocessed wire between the source and monitor/loudspeakers? When you work out large details such as these, the client can begin to do the math. When you tell them that it will cost approximately \$500 to install a loudspeaker in "System A" and \$1,500 to install a video monitor in "System B," they can quickly verify if their vision and checkbook are in the same country.

This is one point in the project where you can safely start talking about the price. By initially working with the client to help define the project's goals, you can allow the client to pro-actively decide what they need versus what they want.

If their budget only has \$100,000, it only has \$100,000. The client can look at the set goals, then make the choices of tradeoffs in the system—quantities or quality. That doesn't mean that you should not help direct and suggest options; these are decisions that you must help your client make. But if you arbitrarily make decisions for your client, you may guess wrong. Having the master plan outlined on paper gives the client the ability to add to the system in a large manner as the project progresses.

The master plan for an audio-visual system is very similar to the long-term growth sector in a business plan. As cash flow starts to come in to an attraction or event, the client can add the loudspeakers or monitors they had to leave out or add the second effects rack at the mix location.

The master planning phase is where the client needs to be educated on not only the technical aspects of the systems, but also on the price for performance. After the client has had that reality check made, they need to be reminded of their decisions. Working together throughout the project from start to finish will help assure that the project is a success in the eyes of your client. **SCN**

Steven J. Thorburn, PE, is a principal with Thorburn Associates Inc., an acoustical and audio-visual consulting firm with offices in Northern and Southern California. He is presently the chair of ICIA's Design Consultants Council and is active in the design and development of themed entertainment attractions around the world. Thorburn can be reached by E-mail at SJT@TA-Inc.com, or at 510.886.7826.

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The client can look at the set goals, then make the choices of tradeoffs in the system—quantities or quality.

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installed. By starting early to constantly build up realistic expectations for the final chosen system, you will be saved from the perception of failure later on. All clients need to realize and buy into the concept that the system will be installed in phases while understanding the features of the final system. They will sell the system to the staff.

If the staff questions the functions of the system, the client will not have to call you with, "how come I can't..." Instead, the client will already know that the system's abilities will grow,