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HEADS-UP ON DISTRIBUTED AUDIO



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- Stewart screens – behind the scenes
- Industry drivers – installer snapshot

ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING TO DO WITH THE CONNECTED HOME INDUSTRY

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HOT PROPERTY MULTI-ROOM AUDIO

Distributed audio is the new 'must have' with tech-savvy homeowners insisting on access to their favourite tunes in every room of the house – including the smallest!



More and more homeowners are blending high fidelity and architecture to complement their individual lifestyles. As most custom installers know, these days, it's not just how a home looks but how it sounds.

Over the past decade, multi-room audio has become a necessity for contemporary living. In the old days, having sound around the house typically involved a hi-fi or boom box in every room. Or one unit that you moved about as required.

Today, multi-room audio means just that. It enables every member of the family to listen to whatever they wish – from CDs, DVDs, MP3s, FM and satellite radio or a music server – whenever they want and wherever they desire to listen; even in the bathroom.

“Everybody wants multi-room audio these days. Today’s solutions are better sounding, more reliable, easier to install, simpler to use and more affordable – it all depends on the level that the client is willing to go to,” says Trevor Rooney, company manager of Len Wallis Audio.

He says it is vital for designers to ensure that their clients understand the exact functionality of the multi-room audio system – and the different keypads – they are purchasing before it is installed.

“Clients need to know the difference between having distributed audio as a separate sub-system in the house, or as part of other sub-systems such as lighting, security, HVAC, video, etc,” he says. According to Trevor, there are basically three levels of multi-room audio.



Today’s multi-room audio systems are more diverse, more affordable and reliable. They are also simpler to install and to use.

Level one is the entry level, traditional system with two or three extra zones run into different rooms via speaker cable and then controlled via IR with a standard hand-held remote control.

Level two is having music stored on a hard drive known as a ‘network attached storage drive’. “This is controlled via either Cat 5 or wireless technology and allows access to the music via an LCD remote from anywhere in the house, giving the user the true meaning of a multi-zone, multi-source system,” he says.

Level three is the crème de la crème. “Not just multi-room audio but a full home automation system. We are seeing a lot more level three installations as people become more aware of what home automation is all about and how it actually works,” Trevor says.

“The next level is something that will store and then stream full DVD collections from a



central point in the home – and that is a whole other ball game,” he adds.

Bernie Sharpe, manager custom products for Audioworks, the custom install division of Amber Technology says “audio is undergoing a revolution”, with iPods, music servers and media servers emerging as part of an audio system for homes, yachts and offices. And clients are really catching on.

“Clients are moving beyond audio in the traditional kitchen, dining and lounge areas of the home and distributing high quality music to bedrooms, bathrooms and even garages, and in some cases, kids’ cubby houses. Systems are far more diverse today with people able to distribute many sources to many ‘zones’. And if they select an IP addressable system, what they can do is endless,” he says.

Bernie says clients are seeking greater information on products, especially music servers and control options.

“The intelligence of a multi-room audio system is generally governed by price: the more you spend, the smarter and more flexible it is. Basic unintelligent offerings can frustrate users – an intelligent system will know the status of

the equipment. As an example, if you have a loud party and switch the system off without turning the volume down, an unintelligent system will turn on at the party volume, blasting you out of the home. Whereas a smart system will have features such as ‘pre set volume turn on’, so it reverts to a lower level without the client having to think and perhaps default to a ‘favourite’ source at turn on, such as their preferred radio station,” he says.

Simple, intuitive user interfaces with minimal control features and on-screen menus can make all the difference to clients who are adverse to what Bernie calls ‘wall acne’.

“Different styles of touchscreens, switches and keypads grouped together on the wall look cluttered, confusing and untidy. Even having different styles in different areas is not a good idea as clients have to remember how to operate each different interface,” he says.

“Clients want elegant interfaces that blend seamlessly with their décor and lifestyle. We are seeing a big shift to audio networking, both wired and wireless due to the sheer convenience it offers, not only for control but because networks display meta data such as

channel guides, radio station information – even the album information from a music server or iPod,” says Bernie.

Managing director of LeisureTech Electronics, Andrew Goldfinch, co-creator of the A-Bus multi-room audio system, says iPods (and MP3 players in general) have brought people back to the art of listening to music. As a result, installers are reaping the benefits by showing clients the joys of integrating multi-room audio into not just their homes, but their lifestyles.

“Music sources are becoming more attainable particularly in the US market where there is so much more available down the pipeline such as a satellite radio, cable radio, Internet streams, etc. All the suppliers of technology to the home are beginning to create music sources. While music servers are popular in the audiophile area the new generation of users have integrated their music into their computer systems and they are looking for ways to stream it through the home; multi-room is becoming more a consumer product as much as a specialised one,” says Andrew, adding that in the future music will be delivered differently from the way it is delivered today.



Having the ability to distribute many music sources to many 'zones' in the house allows homeowners to move beyond the traditional kitchen, dining and lounge areas and distribute high quality music to bedrooms, bathrooms and even garages. In some cases, even the kids' cubby house gets a gurnsey.

"It is more likely to be stored on the home PC connected to a music or media server through the home and driven by an RF device such as your increasingly intelligent mobile phone. The server that we are seeing developed in the hi-fi industry will remain an audiophile product, but here again their intelligence is making them an ideal multi-room product as with individual streaming users in one room can select their own music even if someone in another room is already playing the track," he says.

Music servers are fast becoming an essential component in home entertainment systems, with tech-savvy clients insisting on having the ability to record and store their favourite music on a centrally-located 'data base' that provides convenient, easy access to a music collection from virtually anywhere in the home.

Installers should not overlook the benefits and profits potential music servers offer as part of today's multi-room audio systems.

"Technological advancements over the past two years have made music servers more affordable than ever. Compared with five or six years ago, what you can get today is incredible

and great value for money," says Brenton Morris of Intelligent Home.

Higher performance servers also provide jukebox-like features allowing the user to easily create a song list from their music collection that will play in any order they wish, while many models come standard as iPod compatible.

"I prefer the back-to-base systems because you can link into Foxtel, which has Fox music and if you modulate it you can have it running on all screens in the house and the multi-room audio, controlled via infrared," he says.

"Basically, multi-room audio is going in a bunch of directions at the moment but at the end of the day it will all go via the Internet. We're not quite there yet, but we will be in the next few years," Brenton adds. ■

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