

Grand Theater

Bringing an A/V integrator onboard early in the construction process promises greater revenue for home builders. **BY GABRIEL KARLIS**



THOUGHTFUL DESIGN:

Bringing a certified A/V integrator into the home building process early allows builders to offer home theaters, such as this one by JD Audio and Video Design, at lower price points because of manufacturer preferred-pricing programs.

more home theaters at lower house price points. That's a win-win situation: The builder can offer the home theater as a value-added extra to a wider range of buyers.

Audio/video and related design and installation still constitute a complex process, however. That's why I suggest to my builder customers that they bring the A/V specialist in early in the construction process and use him or her on a consultancy basis, a process I've found has worked very well over the years. The specialist can work with other team members to cut costs while overseeing the work as needed.

To reduce installation costs for structured wiring, for instance, the A/V integrator can team with the contractor's electrician to do the structured wiring for the (see page 18)

THERE WAS A TIME NOT THAT LONG AGO WHEN THE "A/V GUY" WAS CONSIDERED a rarity, an exotic specialist useful only to extremely high-end builders incorporating home theaters into their designs. Left off the traditional construction trades team, these audio/video experts were left to work on their own toward the end of the build.

Today, hundreds of A/V integrators have joined tradespeople such as plumbers and electricians on the jobsite, thanks to the current proliferation of home theaters. With them, they bring new economies of scale for builders to leverage to their advantage.

Keeping Costs Low

Before the first millivolt of signal can be transmitted, of

course, the home theater components have to be acquired. Fortunately, A/V specialists can help builders keep purchasing costs low.

As home theaters become standard in many new homes, A/V consultants can coordinate large-scale purchases of electronics, screens, furniture, and acoustical materials for the builder at prices far better than are available in one-off situa-

tions. Consumer electronics manufacturers give certified residential A/V specialists preferred pricing. In turn, that encourages the building of



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BRAINS OF THE OPERATION:

Home theaters and distributed audio systems aren't just about big screens and big sound; properly functioning touch-panels and wiring are crucial. A/V integrators can check an electrician's work to ensure proper installation.

house's whole-house audio and home theater systems while the rest of the home's wiring is being installed. (In this capacity, the integrator would supervise the electrician's work, making absolutely sure to check all of the A/V wiring when it's done and to send test signals through all of it to ensure that it's been installed correctly.)

An A/V integrator working alone on wiring would tend to be more expensive than an electrician: The typical A/V specialist charges \$175 to \$250 an hour, depending on the region and the job's degree of difficulty, whereas an electrician generally earns \$75 to \$125 an hour. The difference between the two hourly rates multiplied by the number of hours—I usually

example, we use less costly MDF—the material most residential moldings are made from today—and employ it as frames for fabric-wrapped acoustical panels that go in front of the structural walls. As with the electricians, we work with the construction contractor's trimmer specialists designing the panel frames. Again, here the A/V integrator would



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estimate that the additional wiring required for a typical home theater takes about eight hours when done during initial construction—multiplied again by the number of homes in a development equals the savings a builder can achieve on wiring alone. And that amount can be quite substantial.

Builders can achieve additional savings on the construction of the home theater itself. Instead of using wood trim, for

specify and supervise this process as part of his or her overall job bid.

Revenue Opportunities

The level of sophistication among home theaters ranges considerably and is growing every day, but since most similar homes under \$1 million in a given development vary in price no more than \$200,000, and those above \$1 million vary less than \$500,000, the range of

home theater materials can be consistent from house to house. "Good, better, best" is sometimes an option, but I've found that using the same theater design within a development works best, with minor aesthetic variations.

Builders can also gain an advantage when the A/V specialist is included in an after-sale relationship with the buyer. Anything from system upgrades to multiyear warranty service contracts can provide the developer with additional revenue via commissions. In fact, a good working relationship between the builder and the A/V integrator can make it easier to up-sell the home theater and other entertainment home electronics.

There's a definite psychological aspect to keep in mind here: The home theater has replaced the grand foyer and the kitchen as the room where owners can go over the top to express themselves and make a social and economic statement.

The kind of emotion people often invest in their home the-

themselves to potential upgrades that buyers want to actually "experience." That requires an auditioning of components, and the A/V integrator's showroom is the most effective place to do that.

The Right Match

The best way to find the right A/V integrator is to look at the individual's previous work. Also make sure the integrator is certified by the Custom Electronic Design & Installation Association. CEDIA maintains a database accessible to the public that lets you search by electronic systems contractor name and by region. The rapid growth in home theaters has led a lot of people and companies to claim they're A/V integrators, but it takes a lot of training to do the job and a lot of experience to do it right.

Another way to check an A/V integrator's credentials is to call up the manufacturers the integrators say they represent and ascertain that they actually are certified as dealers. (Another benefit of this approach: The more manufacturer lines an integrator represents, the fewer the distributors that can affect the component prices as middlemen.)

The same growth that has spawned both qualified and unqualified A/V specialists has led to greater numbers of CEDIA-certified integrators. That has stimulated competition, so it's now easier to get multiple bids from several reliable service providers.

The home theater and other home entertainment electronics have significant potential to help sell houses and deepen the relationship between builder and buyer. A good A/V integrator can help make that potential a reality. **DH**