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Sound Sanctuary

Budget vs. Reality

by Richard Rutherford

The last several houses of worship we have done were typical, both in terms of technical requirements and the installation process. There were the minor yet expected frustrations of redesign, product returns and reprogramming of DSPs. There is almost always a point however, when budgets collapse and technical requirements are set aside as more urgent needs like carpets and chairs go into cost overrun mode.

Experienced installers know this will happen and either account for it in the preliminary pricing of the project or find creative ways to absorb the costs along the way.

I am sure we have walked over this most holy ground before in regards to who is really in charge when church projects get rolling, and I'll try not to be redundant about the particulars of placing responsibility for fixing the specific project management problems.

When budgets get thin halfway through an otherwise well-planned audio project, there are two basic alternatives to get to the glorious, awe-inspiring system that you have faithfully hoped for.

Plan A: *Keep all the elements of the system and opt for lesser quality.*

Several times, I have cautiously submitted to the client's wishes and gone down the path of quality reduction. I can only suggest to the same that a \$199 speaker does not and cannot sound like an \$800 speaker, nor does a \$199 500-watt-per-channel amp sound like a, like a... well, a real amplifier. Some manufacturers and other deaf mutes will occasionally argue this point with a straight face. (Nothing against the handicapped.)

I suggest that if this still seems like a sensible option, then opt to change just a piece of equipment or two at most. Keeping the quantity of mics, stands, cables, wireless devices and PMs will keep the volunteers busy learning how to properly operate quality gear. Given the level of quality and appropriate quantity of input devices, you might (I said *might*) just get away with that \$529 32-channel console for a while. Yes, the mic pre's will sound "iffy" to the trained ear, but with the sacrifice made on only one device, the rest of a well-thought-out system may just create enough overall headroom to make it fairly survivable for a few months until the tithes grow.

A cheap, but functionally correct console will eventually come in handy for those remote-location events that the youth pastors seem to love. When it comes back all dusty, it will give you a great reason to invest in something that you really wanted! This thinking will also keep the focus on just one future purchase and a clearer financial goal when the time comes.

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I will also say that this type of budget crunch approach will work well with the church's first portable system, or their first installed system, where speakers and their placement are much more critical to the overall result in acoustic quality.

Plan B: *Leave a couple of prime pieces of gear out of the system, but get the good stuff you can afford.*

I have probably opted to go in this direction more often than any other when the budget hammer comes slamming down on the music pastor's vision. Usually, this option becomes most realistic in permanent installations where, once again, speaker type, placement and their associated amplification and processing is critically important.

A good drum shield on a live kit (versus the more acoustically-manageable electronic set) can save a couple thousand dollars. Four channels of quality compressor (versus eight channels of noise-inducing junk) will keep the FOH guy busy, but the results can be acceptable for a while. Yes, it would be great to go completely wireless on the PM system, but a CAT5 cable is not so bad, and you can always "plug and play" the wireless stuff at a later date. If the quantity of items is a true convenience and not a necessity of quality, Plan B may be the way to go.

Plan C: *Be absolutely fearless and buy all the good stuff, regardless.*

I always love it when church committees make this decision. Not only is worry a sin, but shortchanging the quality of worship music just seems a little less-than-faithful. True, there must be some common sense in regards to good stewardship, and I am not suggesting the purchase of a 56 x 12 x 12 x 4-channel console when a 24 x 4 x 2 will do just fine. But I will suggest that all the fastest-growing churches I have ever dealt with just seem to have big, audacious goals in all their ministries, and are not afraid to take responsibility for it. So be honest about your needs, and make plans according to reality (and ask for His advice).

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