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### Sound Sanctuary

#### When is it Over?

by Richard Rutherford

**Unlike the eternal relationship some religions offer, the relationship between sound contractor and the individual House of Worship must, by necessity, end. Or at least change in many ways once the initial project is completed. Both parties must know, accept and prepare for this eventuality so as not to feel "left behind" when it happens.**

The contractor is more likely to be prepared for and understand this process through much past experience. He is also the most qualified to prepare the client for what is to come in the "afterlife" of system installation.

The daily phone calls and site visits on the part of the contractor, common during the joyous insanity of genie lifts, late nights and laptops full of ethereal software, will dissipate and may leave the most faithful pastor with vague feelings of hopelessness. "Oh heavenly Father, please remind me how to soft-patch our new Midas console... Damn! What's Joe's cell number?"

This phase of anxiety should never really happen if both parties have fulfilled their obligations in the previous parts of the relationship. I use the word relationship not in some trendy psycho-babble context, but from the mature viewpoint of effortful communication culminating in a mutually satisfying experience.

The reality is that a qualified contractor should provide four key items in the process of system installation: a) As-Built system documentation, b) Training on each major component of the system, c) A defined outline of responsibilities for each party involved and d) A final system "tweak" after several weeks of public use.

**As-Built** documentation should include a clear signal flow and connection chart of the system. This should be reviewed with the client as part of an initial design and physical walk-through during commissioning of any large system. This not only can be a great confidence builder for the client, but also can be a great time to review the defined functions of each major component. Questions of what the system can (and cannot) do can be clarified and small adjustments made. The client, typically a team of FOH person, Worship Pastor and a couple volunteers, should be included. The client should be very aware that their responsibility includes making sure their team is present, asking questions and taking notes during this type of process.

**System training** is sometimes sadly a vague process. A good contractor will do his best to accomplish two things. One is to clearly point out and re-establish what the system was designed to do and its general limitations. I have seen several instances during a final walk-

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through where a well-meaning client innocently requested “a couple more stage boxes with parallel mic inputs just in case we move the band to that side of the sanctuary ” or “can we add an isolated split for a monitor console and post-production?” What I am talking about are things the client never mentioned until this point, after the concrete is dry. Both parties need to think through the system before signing on the dotted line.

The other typical comment is that the system looks great, sounds great, and since it does, “we might have some big-name guest artists do concerts in here now...” Fine, but the room and mono-system were designed for 96dB maximum SPL, a five-piece contemporary band, one podium, and three fixed choir mics and a 24-channel budget console with two aux sends. You simply can't train someone to drive a Ferrari in the brand new Camry he just bought. Contractor and client both need to be clear on what the system needs to be, before it's built.

The second part of training needs to include supervised hands-on and technical dos and don'ts. I personally think it a disservice on the part of the contractor to program complicated DSPs, key in a lock code, unplug the laptop and immediately hand over a CD copy of the software and files to the client without a serious disclaimer. Some clients are responsible enough not to be dangerously inquisitive, some are not. Why tempt faith?

The client needs to ask questions and be clear on what he really knows and what he doesn't. After all, the majority of House of Worship “sound guys” have mix experience and may have good ears, but are not technically trained beyond the booth.

If your system is an extensive project, a contractor may be able to provide additional training resources through manufacturer-sponsored programs. Many such programs are available and are free: ask, go and learn.

**Final system tuning** seems to never be just that—final. Especially in new installations, the carpet may not be down, all the seats may not be in, all the draperies not yet up, etc. The contractor and client are both responsible for providing a clear definition of what the room is going to be when the audio system is scheduled to be complete. Even the best ears and sophisticated measurement devices cannot guess on what it “might” sound like. Once the room is tuned, delays calculated, gain structures set and basic equalizations fixed, the client must be prepared to leave time to learn. A new console, new mics and different FOH effects all will take their toll on an otherwise great system without some hands-on time. I can't tell you how many times we've heard contractors say, “It sounded good when I was there, but the client is not happy.”

If you are having a new system installed, plan for some time to experiment, read the manuals and do not expect the first Sunday to be perfect. I always suggest you have your AV team take notes for at least a month and get together again with the installer to then do the final tweak.

**Outlining responsibilities** of all of the above at the start of the process might involve several meetings and pages of documentation, or may be just a single page of notes reviewed by both parties. In either case, when the time comes to “bless” the system and move on to the next project, an installer should be confident that the next call will be a referral. The client should feel comfortable and capable of being self-reliant. Work hard, be clear, ask for wisdom, plan for great results. One can only pray for an afterlife that good.

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