



LET'S BRIDGE THE GAP: ONE-STOP SHOPPING FOR THE CUSTOMER

By Howard Slavens

As an electrical contractor with many years experience in the communications industry, it has become increasingly apparent to me that the one-stop shopping concept is sorely needed when it comes to high and low voltage. Electrical contractors, as a rule, do not have employees with low-voltage experience and many low-voltage applications, especially in home automation systems, require licensed electricians. Low-voltage technicians, who wire control devices in switch boxes or power panels, are not only in violation of building codes, but are probably negating the homeowner's insurance policies. I recently heard of a horror story where the general contractor in good faith had hired a low-voltage company and an electrical contractor. The homeowner hired the low-voltage technician to come in on the weekend and finish the job. The low-voltage technician ran a control wire in a switch box, which

shorted out and caused a house fire. The only one to make any money on this job was the lawyer! This entire disaster could have been avoided if the general contractor had hired an electrical contractor that also employed qualified low-voltage technicians: One-Stop Shopping.

GETTING THE IDEA ACROSS

Often times it would appear that low-voltage applications are done as an afterthought or something the homeowners have specifically requested. Some general contractors are either unfamiliar with home theater or home automation systems or they haven't figured out how to integrate them into their budget and be profitable for them. Just this week I had a general contractor tell me when asked about TV and phone outlets "Oh, just run a couple of cables for the TV and a few phone lines. They don't need all those panels and other stuff." This was for twenty-five houses in the \$310,000.00 range. In my opinion, he made a costly mistake. Buyers of these houses are going to want low-voltage upgrades and they will go to the local Yellow Pages and select a low-voltage installer. If they are lucky, they will get a good one. It doesn't really matter if they get a good one or a bad one. It is still going to cost them

more money than the builder could have installed it for: One-Stop Shopping.

CERTIFICATION

Some low-voltage technicians hold some type of certification, which is generally accepted by the industry. But what does that really mean? Electricians or plumbers are licensed by their State and must have completed apprenticeship, journeyman and master programs. To my knowledge, there is no standard low-voltage technician certification program. Electrical contractors, on the other hand, must be licensed by the State, and have a master electrician, who is responsible for all wiring. Apprentice electricians cannot be on the job site alone, regardless of how many years' experience he/she has (it takes four years apprenticeship before you can even take the journeyman's test), yet a low-voltage technician can be on the job pulling cables with zero experience. I also know of extremely qualified, industrial electronic technicians that were trained by the military or a telecommunications company, whose electrical knowledge exceeds that of many master electricians. However, since these individuals don't have an electrician's license they can't even change out a simple switch. As home automation systems and other low-voltage applications become more popular and more sophisticated the larger the gray area between low voltage and high voltage becomes. The solution to this problem is to put the entire package under a licensed electrical contrac-



tor. This will result in fewer personnel on site reducing safety issues. The general contractor and homebuyer only have one sub-contractor to deal with instead of two or three. Furthermore, it places the scheduling and coordination burden on the electrical contractor. It would also eliminate change orders to supply electrical outlets for low-voltage applications. The end result is less paper work for the general contractor, more efficient operation resulting in greater profit margins and a better end product for the homeowner. One-Stop Shopping – it's the only way to go.

HOME ENTERTAINMENT CENTERS

There is a place in the home that is utilized almost daily instead of a location where everyone gathers to watch a movie. Having the resources to design a center to meet a person's or a family's lifestyle is the new challenge for low voltage applications. It can be designed

to accommodate skirts put on by small children, a place of solitude while listening to your favorite music is played over a sound system of your choosing, a place for watching your favorite sport, and of course, a place where you can watch a movie in a setting tailored to your lifestyle.

SOPHISTICATED LIGHTING

Lighting systems vary from the simple flip-a-switch and a light comes on to designated lights at a predetermined intensity coming on when you drive up in your driveway or a "thump in the night" occurs. Lights can be used for security, safety, decoration, mood, accent and various other ways. We all use light to perform these functions, but not in a very sophisticated way. We usually control light intensity by bulb size, sometimes we even get creative and use a three-way bulb. We use night-lights and, of course, our garage light comes on when

we open the garage door. Today's technology allows one to have almost total control over the lighting environment in the home. Designated lights can be totally controlled dependent on time, environmental conditions, situations or manual intervention. Lighting, like the home entertainment center, should be designed around an individual's or family's lifestyle.

DATA NETWORK

Hardwire versus wireless: While wireless is certainly more flexible, it does not provide the reliability or security that is provided by hardwire. Data hubs can be installed in the home that will provide access from any room cabled for data. Wireless can be used in conjunction with a hardwired sys-

tem, but unless a hardwired system is installed at time of construction, you are normally limited to wireless. A hardwired system is highly recommended because of its reliability and security.

EDUCATION AND TIME

It is crucial to meet with the builders and owners in the very beginning of any project rather than as an "afterthought," which is all too common. Education of these new sophisticated systems and the great value they bring is the greatest challenge for electrical contractors and their low-voltage installation crews. Designing a home entertainment center, lighting systems and other low-voltage applications take time. It requires three to four weeks after the preliminary meeting. A second meeting would be required

for presentation of several options. One to two weeks after presentation, the electrical contractor would present a detailed bid (listing of manufacturers, model numbers, technical data) and installation time schedule. ■

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