

residential systems

Management

HIGH Performance

Audio Images' Mark Ontiveros Has Some Great Ideas on How to Tune Up the Reputation of the Custom Install Business

At age 7, he trailed an alarm system installer who was working in his parents' home. It was a hint of things to come.

At 35, Mark Ontiveros is president and sole proprietor of Audio Images, a Tustin, California-based systems integrator and A/V company with a high-end residential client base including executives and entertainment and sports personalities, and a notable list of consultants with whom he partners.

Audio Images' commercial projects have included the Formula One Museum in Brunei and the country's largest rear-screen projection system—16 feet wide by nine feet tall, for Puente Hills Toyota.

The company's residential projects include high-end dedicated home theaters in five 8,000-square-foot spec homes in Anaheim Hills. "It's unique," Ontiveros said, "because nobody offers spec homes with high-end rooms."

Articulate and as outspoken as a candidate for office, Ontiveros is a true believer in "key points" for success—namely service, education, integrity and value.

"I feel a moral responsibility for the industry," he explained. "We're a solutions company, and we believe that there are things the industry should be doing to create value for clients, no matter how much a system costs. It's essential to recommend and build the right mousetrap for the client, whether it's a \$100,000 system or a million-dollar project."

Ontiveros, who launched Audio Images in 1993 on "a wing and a prayer, credit cards and trips to Las Vegas," includes documentation high on his must-do list.

"Dealers can buy all the same products," he said. "It's what you do with them that counts. And you must have documentation. The reputation of the industry depends on value and quality, not on selling what's convenient or what you've purchased on a palette. Without value, negative word-of-mouth will lessen the worth of our industry."

With a current staff of 20, including a full-time director of education and training for staff and clients, a two-person IT/programming department and a full-time service technician, Ontiveros acts as CFO, CEO and the sole Audio Images salesperson.



Mark Ontiveros is president of Audio Images, a Tustin, California-based residential systems integrator. One of his company's recent commercial projects was the Formula One Museum in Brunei, California.

Photos: Pat Rogers Studios (www.pprphoto.com)

"I still fill in the gaps," he noted, "but I'm trying to get out of the middle. My goal for this year is to find a director of operations."

About 95-percent of Audio Image's residential focus is in Orange County. "This way we can emphasize customer service and support, and minimize the fatiguing southern California drive time," he said. "We try to get in a high-efficiency, eight-hour day."

In 2003, the company did \$3.25 million in business, and Ontiveros expects a 10-percent increase this year, depending on construction schedules. "Our average residential project is about \$100,000," he said. "Our most recent jewel is over \$1.2 million in a large and sophisticated estate with a disco and home theater... with everything. You name it."

A car buff who once restored VWs for export to Japan, Ontiveros jumped into the business in 1989 by way of high-end car audio in Orange, California, where he met mentor John Koval of the Koval Quad Mod.

"He taught me a tremendous amount about the proper acoustic relationship, speaker placement and what to listen for," Ontiveros said. "I learned that a lot of it is about the install."

When a friend asked for a home A/V system, Ontiveros went into research mode, hiring an alarm installer from the same company that had wired his parents' home. "At the time, I had a partner who was proficient in construction, and we followed the installer around for three days, paying him to show us how things were done," he said.

Expeditionary trips to CES in the early 1990s proved enlightening, but there was little direct contact with A/V companies. "At that time nobody wanted to talk to anybody who wasn't a retailer," he said. "And the CEDIA show was at the Mirage. I joined CEDIA as soon as I could, about 10 years ago."

If forging good relationships with manufacturers such as Triad Speakers, SpeakerCraft, Kaleidescape, Request Multimedia and others is part of the Ontiveros *modus operandi*, associations with select independent consultants is salient to the company's success.

"I believe in increasing the value in clients' systems by spec'ing the right product and by working with independent consultants," he explained.

Audio Images' key consultants include lighting designer/programmer Neil Splonskowski, PMI president and lead consultant Anthony Grimani, who handles all closed room acoustical engineering analysis and design, Joe Kane of Joe Kane Productions in North Hollywood and Nicholas Grieco, Ontiveros' "right hand." Rolling Thunder, a San Diego software company, helps program Crestron and AMX systems for some Audio Images clients, as well.

"With their expertise, they enable us to provide these value-added systems for clients," Ontiveros said. "My employees love it; they enjoy learning from these consultants."

"Mark takes what he does very seriously," said Anthony Grimani, president and lead consultant of Performance Media Industries Ltd., a consulting firm specializing in multichannel audio system design. "Servicing his clients with the highest quality results is super important to him. He's not after their money; he's after giving them top-level service. That can be hard to accomplish in the world of custom, especially if equipment is not easy to operate or if vendors have challenges."

Ontiveros chooses to associate with contractors who are well-known and oft-quoted, presenting them as a team of experts to Audio Images clients. "Mark has taken this to an art form," Grimani added. "He introduces his roster of consultants at the client meeting, showing the pedigree. His clients are often high level professionals who are used to doing the same for their own companies, so this resonates with them and is effective all around."

A PMI/Audio Images project often results in an infusion of new information that wouldn't develop with an in-house team, Ontiveros noted. "It's important to remember that clients hire us because they want to have fun. They're not buying an accounting service; they're buying entertainment, and it's our responsibility to provide that."

Most custom installers/designers realize only half of how complicated the systems really are, Grimani added. "Getting it to work completely right is rocket science, and our job is to make sure we take control of all of that so the clients can have fun, even if things go sideways."

Ontiveros says that education and training are crucial ingredients in the Audio Images formula, adding that without his real estate and finance degree from Cal State Fullerton, the company would have lasted only for about a year. Adequate training and support for clients is budgeted into Audio Images project quotes.

"We set up multiple training sessions," Ontiveros said. "They're as important as proper system engineering and design. Service is everything."

Ontiveros is also working on getting everyone on his staff certified through



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CEDIA. "They all attend CEDIA Regionals and half attend CEDIA EXPO," he said. "I attend CEDIA Management Conferences every year; they're incredibly valuable."

Ontiveros opens weekly staff meetings with kudos for a task well done before moving on to what he calls the "speed bump" discussion about a factor that slowed them down. "We talk about something we learned the past week on the job, such as walking into a house while they're still spraying lacquer," he explained.

Because so many projects involve new construction, Audio Images deals with a lot of open architecture, wiring for future changes. "Time and time again I've seen poorly pre-wired homes with limited scope," he said.

Ontiveros says that his team has been called in to correct or finish jobs that were left undone or poorly done, including one home theater and automation system for just under \$1 million in which the dealer disappeared after the pre-wire and drywall was completed.

"In finishing these projects, we see very little to no profit, but have kept the industry from another black eye," he said. "Everybody could be more profitable if jobs were done with more integrity. I'm looking at the long-term. The more people who don't have pleasurable experiences, the more it will decrease the long-term value of the company."

Audio Images has made mistakes of its own, Ontiveros acknowledges. "We're not perfect, our clients have had things to complain about, but we hired a service technician earlier this year to do follow-ups. We make sure we did well, and the transition was smooth leaving no loose ends."

Ontiveros says that he is energized by outside activities, including involvement in the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, Young Entrepreneurs' Organization, and in his church, Rockharbor, for which he serves on the A/V committee.

"My corporate name, Henry's Audio Visual, is in memory of my father and grandfather," he said. "They did all the groundwork for the way I run this company and my convictions about integrity and value. They believed in doing business for the long haul."

What he would like, Ontiveros says, is more time for charity work, church and family, when he has one. "I want to be the visionary for Audio Images, without making employees dependent on me for their own success. I want to give them the tools for good quality lives."

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