

Vendor ‘Consultants’ – A Conflict of Interest

The Importance of an Independent Consultant

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Abstract

*Often, vendors and manufacturers will offer technical consulting services whereby they will design an audio-visual system for you – often at little or no apparent charge. These designs, of course, always incorporate only products they sell. Under these circumstances, the vendor or manufacturer has a **clear conflict of interest**. We contend that your interests are better served by hiring an independent A/V design consultant to design and specify a system to give you the best possible results, the greatest flexibility, and the best value for your money. We also contend that your interests are better served by having an independent audio-visual consultant on your side during the installation to ensure that the documentation is complete, and that the installed system meets both the specifications and your needs.*

Introduction

Audio-visual consulting is typically provided by:

- an independent Audio-Visual Design Consultant,
- or an installation contractor,
- or an agent of a hardware manufacturer, vendor, or systems contractor/integrator.

There are **very** important differences between the first option and the last two – *you should consider your choice carefully*:

An independent design consultant has no ties or allegiances to any manufacturer or contractor. They are employed by **you**, and the **advice they give is entirely in your best interest**.

Any vendor, manufacturer, installer, or contractor that also provides “consulting” services has a **clear conflict of interest**.

Salespeople as Technical Consultants

Anyone who sells a product, is paid to sell that particular product – that is how they earn their living. Do you honestly think that a salesperson will recommend products they do not sell? Which of two apparently similar items in a vendor’s stable of products do you think a salesperson is most likely to recommend – the *best* product or the product with the highest commission (usually the *most profitable* product)? Calling a salesman by a different name such as a “sales engineer” or “sales consultant” does not change their function or goals – they are ultimately driven by the profit motive.

Whenever a vendor or manufacturer offers “free” technical consulting, consider the possibility that these services may not really be free (i.e.: the cost is buried elsewhere). Remember the old axiom, “*you never get something for nothing*.”

Worse still, consider the vendor that charges you a fee to design a system on which they will also receive the sales or installation profits – talk about a “win-win” situation for the contractor.

The bottom line is that whoever designs your system will be paid for this service, and they will be paid by *you - one way or another*. You should ensure that you (and only you) are paying the design consultant, thus ensuring that their design is driven by **your** best interests.

The Right Tool for the Job

Technology-based products are such that no one manufacturer makes the best overall equipment. In the real world, you may find that one manufacturer's video projector, for example, may be the best in a certain category, but another of their models may be far from the best in its category. In rapidly changing technologies, the manufacturer who was "on top" six months ago may have slipped to a distant third today.

Think of all the available pieces of equipment as tools in a tool chest. It is the job of the A/V consultant to select the right tools for your project. Consider a pair of pliers. While this is certainly a versatile tool, it is not the best choice for hammering a nail (although it *can* be used for this purpose). A salesperson who sells only pliers may not tell you this.

A correct evaluation of the equipment that is best suited for your application requires an unbiased approach that spans all manufacturers' product lines. This knowledge can only be provided by an independent consultant.

Protect Your Interests

We have all heard horror stories about contractors who perform flawlessly until they secure the order:

The installation process becomes a nightmare, with the crew disappearing to other jobs for days or weeks at a time. When the job is finally complete, and portions of the system either don't work or don't operate the way you expected, you are amazed at how little recourse you seem to have. A year later you hire someone to sort out the problems. When they ask you for the system documentation, you quickly discover that it is incomplete or non-existent . . . resulting in increased costs the second time around.

An independent audio-visual design consultant will write a technical specification that forms part of the contractor's agreement. This will clearly define the system, its minimum expected performance, its function and operator interface, and methods and standards of workmanship. Your consultant will monitor the contractor's work during installation, will test the final system to ensure that it meets the specifications, and will review the contractor's documentation for completeness. **The contractor will not be paid until your consultant certifies that the system performs as specified, that the workmanship is to an acceptable standard, and the documentation and training are complete.**

Imagine the reverse situation in which a salesperson, employed by the contractor, is responsible for holding up payment to their own company if either the system or the installation doesn't meet spec, or the documentation is lacking. Reminiscent of the fox guarding the hen house!

Summary

An independent audio-visual design consultant does not sell products and does not perform installation services. You should be *very wary* of anyone who claims to be a "consultant," and then offers to quote on the products and/or the installation of the system that they have designed.

Only by hiring an independent design consultant, can you be assured that you are getting both the best possible system design and a "watchdog" to keep the vendor and installer honest.

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