

## **How To Hire A Custom Installer**

*By Mitchell Klein - Taken from Audio Video Interiors Magazine*

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Finding a custom installer to design your home theatre or media room may seem like a daunting endeavour. You're dealing with home electronics, after all, and electronics can be intimidating. But hiring a custom installer is really no different than hiring an architect, interior designer or other professional. The most important factor to consider is experience. You want someone you can trust who isn't going to "drop the ball" halfway through the project.

There's no need to feel intimidated, either, because an experienced custom installer recognizes the importance of establishing a good rapport with clients from the start. If the installer has an "attitude," don't waste your time, because his attitude will only get worse. Your future custom installer should make you feel relaxed and appreciated, not patronized. Any lack of knowledge about electronics on your part should be met with an enthusiastic and sincere desire to educate you. The installer should be willing to take the time to help you understand the options available to meet your requirements and your budget.

Before you begin your search, ask yourself these fundamental questions: Are you looking for the best firm with complete, beginning-to-end responsibility for your project? Is this firm expected to design, engineer and provide comprehensive documentation, and integrate with all the other parties involved (i.e., architect, interior designer, builder, cabinetmaker)?

Perhaps you're looking for the lowest possible price or most economical solution to your needs. Make sure you understand the differences between simple systems (not necessarily easy to use or future upgradeable) and expensive systems. Generally speaking, the easier a system is to use, the more expensive it is to purchase and install. With custom-installed home media systems, the old adage, "you get what you pay for" applies in spades.

The following guidelines will help prepare you in your search for the technical "guru" you'll be relying on for years to come. As with any professional relationship, make sure you look for the right fit between you and your installer. This isn't like having appliances delivered and hooked up by someone you'll never see again. If you've chosen well, you'll be in contact with your custom installer for many years to come.

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### **Check References of Comparable Projects**

It amazes me how seldom clients ask for references, much less contact them. A minimum of three should be obtained (and make sure they're not friends or relatives of the installer). Request that these references represent systems of comparable scope to yours. It's of limited value to discuss an elaborate lighting control installation with a reference that merely bought a TV from this firm. Ask references the following questions: Are they happy with the system? Are they satisfied with the work performed? Can they actually operate the system with ease? Was the installer responsive to their needs and requests, or did he

constantly cajole them into altering their expectations? With hindsight, how would they have done things differently, if at all?

When obtaining references, I recommend acquiring at least three from the "trade," ideally the architect, interior designer and cabinetmaker, if applicable. Whether or not you're working with one is unimportant. An installer's ability to work closely with a design professional is a good barometer of his or her professionalism.

Did the installer keep the project on schedule to the satisfaction of everyone involved? Would they recommend the installer to their own clients? Was the installer instrumental in preventing, or overcoming problems through good communication? Did the installer contribute innovative ideas and solutions?

### Inspect the Facility

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a visit to the installer's office is worth thousands of dollars. A visual inspection of the installer's operation will speak volumes about his work. Granted, not every installer will have extensive display or demo facilities. All you want to ensure is that this firm is neat and committed to its business. A quick check of the staff experience and service, attention to detail and business management is indicative of their ability to service your needs today, and tomorrow. Trust your instincts.

Call the office. Do you get a "live" person, or an answering machine? If it's a machine, do they return your call promptly? Can you reach your contact when you (or other professionals such as cabinetmakers and interior designers) need to?

### Whose Products Do They Sell?

I must caution you about choosing your custom installer solely on the basis of the brands he or she carries. Examine the installer's overall product mix and ask why certain suppliers were chosen. The answers can be very revealing about the company. Be wary if the installer says: "I don't stock their products, but I can get them." Rest assured that most manufacturers choose their dealers carefully. Make sure the installer is a factory authorized dealer for those products that are vital to your system. If a product needs repair under the warranty, you don't want to have to send it to some warehouse in another state. You'll want your custom installer to take care of it and offer a temporary replacement if necessary. Another important point regarding authorized dealers concerns prices: Installers cannot carry every brand on the market. They select specific manufacturers' goods based on their own preferences, the availability of those products within their region, the reputation of the manufacturer for reliable servicing (especially with CRT projectors), and competitive pricing.

### Explore Their Knowledge

Custom installation firms don't just install equipment. First, they must identify the client's needs and expectations. Then they must identify limitations and problems. They must analyze wiring schematics. Then they must plan the system, recommend equipment and quote a price. Sometimes this process must be repeated to accommodate a budget. All of this is very time consuming. However, a qualified installer can offer a realistic quote much quicker than a novice. An installer with extensive knowledge of technologies and products currently on the market, who also knows what may be obsolete in a year or

two, can save you a lot of money and heartache. It's important, therefore, to hire an installer who's done this before; the more education he or she has concerning electronics and related studies, the better.

[The Custom Electronic Design & Installation Association (CEDIA\*) offers courses throughout the year on a wide variety of topics from wiring and acoustics to home automation and future technologies. Ask your prospective installer if he or she is a CEDIA member and if they've attended any of these seminars. This is not to imply that only CEDIA members are competent installers, but it is a good starting point. - Ed.]

It amazes me how so many people have become overnight "experts" in so many disciplines so quickly. I run into associates all the time who have expanded into home theatre, or lighting control systems, after years of installing car stereos or burglar alarms. When it comes to custom home entertainment installations there is nothing more dangerous or costly than a "little knowledge." Granted, in this business of rapidly advancing technologies, we're all learning all the time. Just make sure your Custom Installer isn't learning at your expense.

Interview your prospect. Ask what his or her educational background is. Why did she become interested in custom installation work? Where was he previously employed? Was it a consumer electronics store, another installer, an alarm company, an aeronautics firm? Ask about her views on audio and video, and future technological advances for the home.

### **Use Common Sense**

Once again, trust your instincts. If a "deal" seems too good to be true, it is. Remember, you're buying the entire company when you purchase an installed system. Look at the company as a whole and make your decision based on your impressions of everyone who works there. When asking questions, don't try to intimidate the installer; but don't be afraid to ask tough questions. If their answers are vague, be skeptical. In addition to experience, you're primarily interested in their enthusiasm. They should be passionate about what they do.

### **CHECKLIST**

- Verify that the installer is fully insured and licensed
- Get the quote in writing. Make sure it's all-inclusive, closed end, firm and detailed. Be clear on any and all additional charges.
- Make sure you fully understand what each comparative system is designed to do, how it will function and how it will perform. No two systems are ever exactly alike.
- Never tell one installer what another installer has bid, because if he lowers his bid, you can rest assured, you're paying for it somewhere either in equipment, time or service. And be cautious about the lowest quote. You're buying a complete product/service/performance package. The lowest price is not rarely the best option.
- Make sure you understand exactly which responsibilities the installer is accountable for. Does the quote include system pre-wiring? Documentation? Elevations? Wiring diagrams? Project meetings and management?
- Procure a written inventory of all equipment: exact brand, make and model numbers of every product you are buying. Accept no unauthorized substitutions.

Mitchell Klein is president and owner of Media Systems, a Boston-based custom design, and engineering installation firm. He has more than 18 years of experience in consumer electronics and custom installation work.