

How to Hire an Electronics Systems Contractor

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By Mitch Klein, CEDIA President*

Finding an Electronics Systems Contractor (ESC) to design your home theater or media room may seem like a daunting endeavor. You're dealing with home electronics, after all, and electronics can be intimidating. But hiring an ESC 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 ESC 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 electronics professional 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 electronics 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 ESC. 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 electronics professional for many years to come.

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). 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 who merely bought a TV from this firm.

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Ask references the following questions:

- Are they happy with their systems?
- Are they satisfied with the work performed?
- Can they actually operate the systems with ease?
- Was the ESC responsive to their needs and requests, or did they 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 "trades," 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 ESC's office is worth thousands of dollars. A visual inspection of their operation will speak volumes about their work. You want to ensure is that the firm is neat and organized, 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? If they don't have an office or showrooms of any kind, chances are they are not really committed to the industry or committed to their own business, and may not be around long term.

Whose Products Do They Sell?

I must caution you about choosing your ESC solely on the basis of the brands he or she carries. Examine their overall product mix and ask why certain suppliers were chosen. The answers can be very revealing about the company. Be wary if they say "I don't stock their products, but I can get them." Rest assured that most manufacturers choose their dealers carefully. Make sure they are 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 country. You'll want your ESC to take care of it and offer a temporary replacement if necessary. Another important point regarding authorized dealers concerns prices: ESC's 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 and competitive pricing.

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Explore Their Knowledge

Electronic systems contractors don't just install equipment. First, they must identify the client's needs and expectations, then 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 very time consuming. However, a qualified company can offer a realistic quote much quicker than a novice. A company 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 ESC who has 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 the prospective ESC if he or she is a CEDIA member and if they've attended any of these seminars. Better yet, ask about their relevant certifications. 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 theater, or lighting control systems, after years of installing car stereos or burglar alarms. When it comes to custom electronic system 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 ESC isn't learning at your expense.

Interview your prospect. Ask what his or her educational background is. Why did she become interested in custom electronics? Ask where he was previously employed. Was it a consumer electronics store, another company, an alarm company? Ask his views on 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 ESC is fully insured and licensed and has relevant industry accreditations.
- Get the quote in writing. Make sure it is an all-inclusive, closed end, firm bid. 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 ESC what another has bid because if he lowers his bid, you can rest assured you're paying for it somewhere either in equipment, time or service. Be cautious about the lowest quote. You're buying a complete product/service/performance package
- The lowest price is 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 and accept no unauthorized substitutions

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