

## Lessons Learned: Tips from Four Building & Design Pros

Electronic Lifestyles® magazine editor, Maureen Jensen, sat down with Electronic Systems Integrator (ESI) partners, Mike Keesee CPBD, AIBD; Marlene Oliphant, Allied ASID, CID; Mark Demerly, AIA, LEED AP; and Andy Rosenthal, home builder, to find out where their businesses are focused and what they have learned about working with Electronic Systems Contractors.

**EL: How long have you been working with Electronic Systems Integrator? Have the jobs grown, and what is the state of your market at the moment?**

**Mike Keesee:** We were first introduced to using Electronic Systems Integrators in 2005. We are located in Metro Orlando and the market, though down, is starting to see a little more life as of late.

**Marlene Oliphant:** I'm based in the Los Angeles area, and have been working with ESIs for five years now. Every client I work with is interested in new electronic equipment for their home, whether in the den, master bedroom, guestroom or master bath. I find the qualified contractors extremely helpful and informative. I don't want my clients to make an expensive mistake in selecting equipment, so I go right to the experts. The market is very good, but competitive, and people are very value-conscious.

**Mark Demerly:** We have been working with ESIs for the past 10 years. The projects have grown from simple home entertainment systems, to totally integrated systems with central lighting, heating, security, audio, video and shade control systems. Though we have completed projects throughout the Midwest and across the U.S., our primary market is in Central Indiana (greater Indianapolis metropolitan area).

**Andy Rosenthal:** We have been working with ESIs for about seven years now and work with several different companies, depending on the particulars of any given job. We are located in the Washington D.C. metro area and our market is very competitive; there are many bidders for fewer jobs.

**EL: What is the biggest lesson you have learned from working with Electronic Systems Integrators? Mistakes to avoid?**

**Keesee:** Planning for the future is the biggest lesson learned. Although we don't know what it will bring, we can certainly try to allow for expansion and design areas that will give access to the home for that. The biggest mistake to avoid? That's easy, be sure to have an Electronic Systems Integrator on your design team.

**Oliphant:** Pricing varies considerably, and there are many layers of price-point in all products. Mistakes to avoid: never order the least-expensive equipment or contractor! Measure twice to be certain that new components and wiring fit new or existing cabinetry. Allow for ventilation of heat generating components.

**Demerly:** One of the biggest lessons is to get the ESI involved at the beginning of a project, even before design begins. This allows us to determine scope of the system, budget for the system within the overall cost of the home, and provide the necessary space for the systems.

Though most AV equipment can be installed in relatively small spaces, they must be properly ventilated and room allowed for access. Also, central lighting/dimming control panels require a much larger area of wall space, which can mean a challenge in some high-rise condominium projects.

Another clarification that needs to be conveyed to a client at the beginning of a project: a "simple system" is not usually an inexpensive system. One of the biggest mistakes the industry continues to violate is installing Televisions above fireplaces. This is ergonomically the worst location and the esthetics of the room are greatly compromised.

**Rosenthal:** We have found that the system design and system programming is key, especially in complicated systems. The wires can be pretty and neat, but if the company does not have experts in system design and programming, trouble is ahead.

**EL: In this economy, how do you see your relationships with ESIs growing?**

**Keesee:** We see our relationships with ESIs to continue to grow. The biggest reason is our client base is becoming educated on the advantages of having an integrated electronic system. As the green movement continues forward, the ESI will play a bigger and bigger role in providing energy-saving products and techniques to lower the cost of running your home.

**Oliphant:** Because value has become so important to my clients, the industry will continue to grow along with the interior design business. As long as clients feel that their needs have been addressed and that someone is listening carefully to their needs and desires, the market will naturally expand through referrals.

**Demerly:** Customers are looking for more economical solutions and integration of home entertainment rooms into the main living space. With increased energy cost and less money to borrow, our newer homes have more efficient, flexible and multipurpose rooms for the family to use. Customers are forgoing the formal living room and dining room for larger informal living spaces. Fewer are requesting dedicated 'home theaters' and want this feature in their main living space instead.

This requires more involvement with the ESI to integrate the home theaters into these spaces and to ensure proper location of speakers and equipment for proper viewing. We are also seeing a greater interest in integrated systems that allow control of lighting, heating, sun control etc. that provides energy savings to the customer.

**Rosenthal:** Right now price is king. I do think once the market settles; everyone is interested at some level in having home technology.

**EL: Describe the most fulfilling job you or a colleague has produced with an ESI?**

**Keesee:** Our firm's best job working with an ESI was to provide the controls of all of the electronics for the 2007 International Builders Show Home (the In Sync home). This was also our best education as the home had many challenges during construction. With vendors jumping on board throughout the construction process, plans changed almost daily to accommodate their products.

This meant the ESI had to continually change their programming to meet the needs of the home. In the end, the job turned out spectacular and everything came together beautifully.

**Oliphant:** We created a home theater in a great room/ living room that virtually disappeared behind beautiful cabinetry when not in use. The clients like to entertain in that area and did not want it to look like a home theater. The cabinetry was so integrated into the design, so it looks like gorgeous furniture when the TV is behind doors. The speakers are also invisible and this means the family can have their weekend movie time and the room then becomes a theater instead of a living room.

**Demerly:** A recent project was relatively small. We worked with the client six years ago on the remodel of their new home. The customer wanted more control and features with the original system, and needed to replace the old large video monitors with flat panels.

We and the ESI evaluated the clients' desire for upgraded audio, iPod/computer audio file docking, new home theater system for family room and security monitoring system. The final product allows for future flexibility and easy updating, integration of speakers and video into new cabinetry and concealed cabinetry, all with very little impact on the existing home and finishes.

**Rosenthal:** The ESI installed a small Crestron lighting system. The customer loves the system and constantly mentions how easy it is to operate and how they love the added security of being able to control their lights from their car when they come home after dark.