

Successful Ultra High-End A/V Showrooms

Proper location, performance, and the involvement of elite architects, builders, and designers is a must

by Brian Barr

I know what many of you are thinking. Why would anyone passionately write an article on building an ultra high-performance A/V showroom, especially in this recessed economy? Most A/V integrators believe they can sell top systems without a showroom. A majority of architects, builders, designers, and clients believe that they have seen and heard it all. They are all wrong.

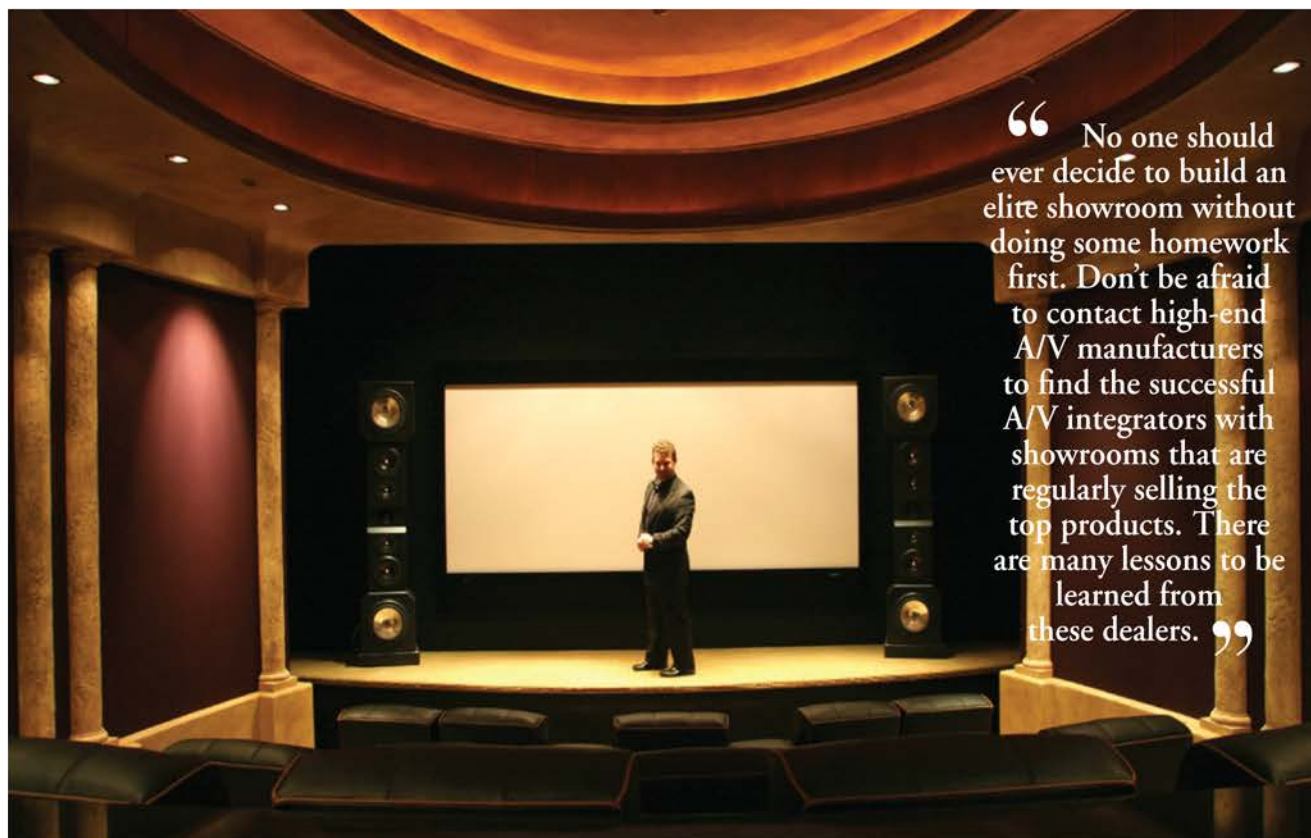
Without a top showroom, A/V integrators are forced to educate business associates and clients with nothing other than words and pictures. This is like trying to explain how one feels at a live concert, driving on a real racetrack, or even falling in love. The

person who has not had experienced those events won't understand. Even the most educated A/V integrators can only partially recreate the "real thing" at their meetings armed with only their experiences, creative words, and pictures. This is why an ultra

high-end showroom becomes essential.

Keep in mind that such a facility must be state of the art, or failure is on the horizon. You cannot compete against the big box retailers of the world. Actively showing mediocre audio and video systems will

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waste your money. It also wastes the time of all the architects, builders, designers, and clients who'll be disappointed in seeing systems that are inferior, or the same as others they've experienced. Your showroom should provide them with the best audio and video performance they have ever experienced, period.

If you do not have the money, time, and resources to properly construct and operate a top A/V showroom, then you should leave this project for the future when you are prepared. You must "go big", or not at all. Otherwise, continue to do your best by having A/V related meetings in offices, homes, restaurants, and golf courses. You can meet architects, builders, designers, and future clients at non-competitive A/V dealer showrooms or at other client homes that are outfitted with top A/V systems.

Unfortunately, over 90 percent of my meetings take place outside of elite CAT A/V showrooms. I do not always have state of the art physical A/V tools available for demonstration. But when I do have an elite CAT showroom available, the results are nothing short of awesome! I'm an expert at conveying my message without a showroom, but as our top CAT showroom dealers know, the meetings that do occur with the help of high-end showrooms are wildly successful for all their architects, builders, designers, and clients on multiple levels. Dealers who are fortunate and wise enough to own a top showroom are far more successful than those without this powerful differentiating tool.

Recently, I witnessed a renowned architect visit an elite CAT MBX showroom for the first time. After his visit he excitedly stated, "This is my new drug!" He immediately discussed bringing his entire staff over for an afternoon training seminar, as well as all of his clients and subcontractors. He even asked if he could bring his wife over to watch movies and his friends over to watch sporting events.

Some A/V integrators believe that they can successfully sell top systems without an elite showroom. This is a great misconception. The problem is that those dealers have never experienced a state of the art A/V system.

Misplaced egos seem to be a characteristic of our industry, so the next time you hear A/V integrators bragging about their successes and their newest celebrity clients, ask each of them about their showroom. If they tell you that they don't need one, ask them if they have ever sold a \$250,000 projector, or a pair of \$250,000 loudspeakers? Have they ever designed, engineered, calibrated, and serviced a \$1 to \$10 million custom audio/video system? These dealers are missing out on forming lucrative relationships with all the architects, builders, and designers.

A cold, hard fact is that while CAT has over 100 dealers, no CAT dealer has ever sold a pair of our custom, expensive, high-end freestanding loudspeaker masterpieces without actively displaying them in an acoustically designed, engineered, and on-site calibrated showroom. In fact, of the more than a dozen CAT dealers who demonstrate at least one pair of our \$250,000+ loudspeakers, all but two have successfully sold at least one pair.

Showroom dealers have sold many multi hundred-thousand dollar freestanding CAT loudspeakers, and dozens of industry leading and defining custom in-wall CAT loudspeaker systems as well. Based on this incredible proven success, even in our recessed economy, over a dozen CAT dealers are building new showrooms. Many CAT dealers are updating their showrooms as well.

Always Educate, Never Sell

A/V dealers who own and operate successful showrooms use them to educate architects, builders, designers and clients. State of the art showrooms, by definition, should continually be updated and operated for their knowledge, rather than for sales and marketing purposes. All of these people should visit your ultra high-performance showroom yearly to continue their education of the evolving audio/video industry.

Passionately use your showroom to provide the ultimate audio and video experience to every woman, man, and child that you can. It is important to treat everyone as equals. There should be little to no difference in your presentations. Your showroom

should provide the same magical and educational experience to every client, architect, builder, designer, family member, child, friend, realtor, or any other human being that you and your company teammates believe in making time for.

Do Your Research

No one should ever decide to build an elite showroom without doing some homework first. Don't be afraid to contact high-end A/V manufacturers to find the successful A/V integrators with showrooms that are regularly selling the top products. There are many lessons to be learned from these dealers.

For example, these dealers regularly update their showrooms. Top showroom dealers should not allow themselves to get "stuck" with out-of-date equipment. As new and improved technologies emerge, they proactively sell their slightly used A/V gear to fortunate clients as "B stock". Fortunately, properly designed and engineered showrooms do not have many products that quickly go out-of-date. Only computer-based products (projectors, video processors, audio processors, audio DSPs/digital signal processors, control systems, etc.) suffer from this problem. However, in most cases, for truly elite ultra high-end showrooms, world-class loudspeakers, amplifiers, equipment racks and cabling can last much longer. Even screens, CD players, and DVD players will usually last for many years before significant improvements are made.

Also, don't be afraid to approach your peers. I have never understood why A/V business people attend one, two, or even five or more tradeshows per year, yet they do not take the time to visit integrators who are more successful than themselves. I strongly suggest visiting owners that operate successful showrooms if you are planning to build one, or even if you currently own an A/V showroom that is not significantly helping your business. Visit more than one, if you can; you will find numerous successful commonalities among them.

Just be careful. Learn, but do not fall prey to any the negative preaching of those who

have not been successful with their showrooms, or those who believe that they are successful by not having a showroom.

Utilizing the Successful Showroom

Once you have a showroom, it is important to use it wisely. Join the American Institute of Architects (AIA), the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) and other professional organizations. Invite members to have meetings at your showroom.

You can also use it to generate high-value, exclusive events. For example, you could charge \$1,000 to \$3,000 for a three hour "night in audio/video paradise" for ten fortunate guests. The price might include unlimited food and beverages. You could also, on occasion, actually generate some revenue by selling showroom time to various corporate clients for video conferencing, sporting events, movie nights, etc. (however, this should not be your primary objective). You can also donate these experiences to all your favorite charities and auctions. After an incredible experience in your showroom, top auction bidders may contract you to provide their families with elite A/V systems in their homes.

There are great opportunities with other subcontractors as well. Visit all your current jobsites and invite all the top foundation specialists, framers, electricians, plumbers, HVAC installers, cabinet makers, swimming pool builders, landscape designers, roofers, window installers, painters, etc. to tour your showroom. Give this experience as a gift to them and their families. Doing all of this will create activity in your showroom numerous times per week (not just once a month for a client meeting).

Location, location, location

In regards to business, we've all heard this phrase hundreds of times: "location, location, location." Yet, many top A/V integrators ignored all three words when they built their A/V showrooms in very sub-standard locations. I travel approximately 300 days per year throughout the world visiting the offices of top architects, builders, and designers. I am rarely negatively "shocked"



The author with CAT speakers on display at a high-end showroom.

by any of their locations or business practices. I wish I could say the same about A/V integrators.

I hear endless excuses regarding the less than desirable location and less than perfect showroom, only occasionally interrupted by them preaching to me that their territory is significantly different than all other territories. Their "my showroom is not in a great area" speech is so well rehearsed. I always get the feeling that they've foolishly delivered it hundreds of times to all the architects, builders, designers and clients they've brought to their showroom. I also call it the "prepare yourself for the bars on my window" speech.

I'm not suggesting that A/V dealers refinance their homes and businesses to place themselves next to Tiffany & Co., or Bulgari. In fact, I suggest avoiding retail locations. Your showroom should be "by appointment only", and should strive in every manner possible (professionally and aesthetically) to be viewed like a top architect's office. Be in an area where people do not fear for their safety in broad daylight.

The operations side of your A/V business and your showroom should be in separate locations. One of the reasons why A/V facilities are traditionally located in bad areas is because of the space needed for operations. This is a mistake. Go ahead and place your

operations where it is most cost effective, but don't include the showroom in that space. After all, a world-class showroom can easily live in 1,000 square feet.

I am not suggesting to place the operations of your company in a dangerous location. I am suggesting that your operations should exist in a space that is less expensive, and farther from high-rent districts where your showroom should be located. It should be selected knowing that few people (other than those in operations and shipping) will ever enter the space.

Look at the purpose of your showroom this way: I recently saw this year's Star Trek at an IMAX theater, and then again at a commercial theater. The second viewing experience was disappointing, to say the least. Most architects, builders, designers and clients have only experienced surround sound performance at a normal commercial theater. Few have experienced a world class, properly designed, engineered, custom manufactured, and on-site calibrated home theater. Words can never describe the real thing. This is why elite showrooms are necessary! A showroom allows you to educate all of your desired clientele by passionately showcasing incredible audio/video technologies in your showroom. Explain how your A/V company can significantly add value to all of their lives! ●