

InfoComm Surprises



By Mark Mayfield

"In these economic times" you'd expect a trade event to be a dismal affair. After all, pro AV and IT technologies are part of the infrastructure of commercial construction projects, and we're in a recession, right? There's no spending or building, so what kind of exciting technologies would you expect to see in economic conditions second in severity only to the Great Depression?

Think again. The irony of InfoComm 2009 was that there were, in fact, surprises. To begin with, it was well attended. InfoComm officials called it their biggest East Coast show ever, with more than 850 exhibitors and 29,000 AV professionals attending from more than 80 countries. Beyond the numbers, there were new product launches, new exhibitors, and a few true advances in AV technology areas that we called "commoditized" during the good years. Here's a recap of just a few of the things that caught our attention.

AV GONE DIGITAL

Everyone talk about the digital revolution, but Crestron really gets it. They also understand that in the AV world, the revolution is still underway. We still have too many standards, too many issues interfacing various pieces of AV gear, and, above all, end-users who are confused by it all. Crestron's DigitalMedia is offered to help us through the transition to the digital age.

DigitalMedia is a complete, integrated family of products that manages, controls,

and distributes all analog and uncompressed HD digital content over twisted pair or fiber. Among the first products in the family are DigitalMedia matrix switchers — flexible, modular systems that can accept virtually every signal type and transmit them long distance as digital "DigitalMedia" signals. It includes built-in exclusive "QuickSwitch HD" technology with pre-authorized HDCP keys that maintain a constant handshake for continuous, glitch-free HD switching. But that's just the start; DigitalMedia solves many of the problems and challenges of AV in an IT world.

DIGITAL AUDIO NETWORKING

QSC Audio introduced a complete integrated audio system platform that includes audio routing, processing, monitoring, and control in a software-based system.

Using premium converters and Gigabit Ethernet, the fundamental Q-Sys architecture produces a total system latency of less than 2.5 milliseconds between any input and output, with multiple network switch hops and audiophile-quality processing throughout.

Another digital audio networking contender — Audinate's Dante — arrived in full form at this year's InfoComm, complete with heavy-hitter partners like Bosch Communications, Yamaha, and a couple of dozen other licensees.

Dante is compatible with standard internet protocols — not just Ethernet — and allows audio channels to co-exist with other data traf-

fic. This means that if your equipment already has an Ethernet interface supporting TCP/IP for remote management and control, Dante can share this interface, minimizing components and re-engineering costs.

Audinate also announced that the next major release of Dante digital media networking solution will be compliant with the standards emerging from the IEEE 802.1 Audio Video Bridging (AVB) task group — which leads to our next surprise.

HAVE YOU SEEN THE BRIDGE?

Way over to the far left side of the "Audio Pavilion" was a rather unimpressive exhibit sponsored by Harman International, Broadcom, Meyer Sound, XMOS, and IEEE. But it may turn out to have been the most significant booth in the hall. Representatives were on hand to explain the work of IEEE's Audio/Video Bridging (AVB) Task group. The group has developed a series of extensions to Ethernet, known as Ethernet AV, that provides the means for guaranteed delivery of low-latency, perfectly synchronized audio and video. Ethernet AV will use IEEE 802.1as clock synchronization and IEEE 802.1Qav QoS to support audio and video media transport across Ethernet networks. This is significant, because, until now, the AV industry has been faced with proprietary protocols and methods from manufacturers, and no real standard that combined audio and video. If Ethernet AV lives up to its promise and is accepted industry-wide, it may finally be the "bridge" between AV and IT that we've been looking for.

IS IT A DISPLAY OR A SCREEN?

This was the question in my mind as I walked past the AccelerOptics booth. Their Capture screen is actually a front projection screen, but at a distance it looked like a bright flat panel display. I actually mistook it for a bright LED display. AccelerOptics calls it a "digital display technology," but really it's a screen surface that's curved slightly in both directions, and appears flat once installed. The surface rejects ambient light while capturing and redistributing the projected light to a defined viewing area in order to create a digital image with ultra-high optical gains. So you can have the benefits of projection system (low cost, large image, installation flexibility) and the brightness of a flat panel display. (See our May issue cover for a good example.)