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QUALITY

BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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FIRST IN DIGITAL STEREO

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A dealer's obligation is to help their customers make the best decisions. I once had a prospective dealer complain to me that I was "selling" him quality instead of price. Does such an attitude serve his customers? Some would say yes - if that is their customer's attitude. But, in my opinion, this points up a lack of leadership.

When I began my involvement in theatre activities, I was warned by the president of a major manufacturer that the network of theatre equipment dealers was in a poor state. Some dealers were quite good, while others were not much more than order takers. He commended the Theatre Equipment Association for its efforts to keep its members up to date, but he still felt more needed to be done.

The marketing vice president of another equipment company feels that there are too many manufacturers serving too few customers resulting in near chaos and a diminishing of standards. This, just when most theatres need to be reequipped with modern high quality projection and sound.

A senior sound engineer at one of Hollywood's most famous sound facilities deplores theatre sound systems: Too much distortion, too little volume level and just awful sound. He is frustrated that his good work (and it is good work) is wasted most of the time "...even in Hollywood theatres".

An objective analysis of the sound most people hear when they attend theatres would most likely consist of the following conclusions: 1: The sound in most theatres, including new ones, is atrocious. 2: Film recordings have already far outstripped most theatre's ability to play them and are still rapidly improving. 3: The level of expertise in the field has too many soft spots. 4: There are strong efforts underway to improve the situation. 5: These efforts are being hampered by a poor understanding of sound technology, politics, resistance to change and the ill conceived notion that the public doesn't know the difference.

I personally know of a handful of admirable leaders in the industry who are trying to improve things. And I occasionally hear what some others are saying about them. One needs to ask how insulting a person, his company, a new product or a superior design contributes anything. Does negativism improve profits?

The fact is that the public is voting with dollars. People have equipped their homes with stereo. They are now spending hundreds of dollars equipping their cars with stereo. They spend more to attend a live concert than they would ever spend to see a movie. I have heard from many of these people over and over again that they consider theatre sound a joke. The solution is rather simple: Theatres should be furnished with the most complete high quality multi channel and stereo sound systems available.

Next month marks the 1983 NATO convention at Anaheim California's most successful entertainment complex; Disneyland. Like other success stories, Disneyland is characterized by an unfailing commitment to quality. Those attending the affair will undoubtedly hear several spokesman continue the push for better presentation quality. My hope, as always, is that the trade show will be a smash. Those who wish to, should be able to find all the best the industry has to offer them. But unfortunately, I've learned some of the leading amplifier manufacturers won't be bothering with the convention again this year. The president of one of these told me recently that there just wasn't enough serious interest in professional quality power amplifiers among theatre owners and their dealers. This is a terrible situation.

I don't sell amplifiers, but I can report that the theatre industry needs to recognize that the amplifier situation in many theatres is a real source of shame. Too many sound systems suffer from insufficient power, poor quality and even worn out or obsolete units that are still in service. There are excellent professional grade amplifiers available. If you want one, and you should, you won't see most of them at NATO.

One of my dealers laments about an attitude he finds too often expressed by some theatre owners; "Price is no object, show me your cheapest." Such behavior can be found in any industry, but has it got out of hand in this one?

According to one manufacturing vice president, recent entreaties from industry leaders to improve quality seem to be more "listened to" even if not acted upon. If he is right, the NATO convention is a logical place to continue the push for top quality as well as a place to find the real ways to achieve it.

We have seen business improve in every theatre where a superior high fidelity sound system has been installed. We've even seen distribution patterns radically altered in one case where a circuit decided to go with first class equipment. Quality is good business and good for business.

PS: It's more fun too.

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John F. Allen is the founder and president of High Performance Stereo in Newton, Mass. He is also the inventor of the HPS-4000® cinema sound system and in 1984 was the first to bring digital sound to the cinema. John Allen can be reached by E-mail at JohnFallen@aol.com.