



Report From The Heartland

My day-to-day work as editor of SCN is a lot like that of a switchboard operator. Every day I engage in phone conversations with contractors, consultants, and manufacturers based all over the U.S. and Canada, gathering reports on the true state of the industry. I have also had the privilege of connecting some of these calling parties with business news and other tidbits of information.

In the past, I was happy to filter these insights and use them where possible in the print edition of SCN. But given all that we face as an industry at the present moment, I'd like to share with more frequency the updates that I hear. And so I present the answer to the question, "How's business?" in an ongoing series of blog entries with real-world information on the workload--and pipeline--of our readers.

My first source is Larry Heilman, president of Smith Audio Visual in Topeka, Kansas. In addition to its regular work as an AV integrator, Smith Audio Visual recently introduced its 1TouchDigital courtroom recorder. The success of that introduction has added an extra spark to the existing work that Smith Audio Visual is still lining up.

Despite a few bumps in the road, things are moving right along for the company. "We had a drop in December and January, which I think everybody felt. It was the worst drop I've ever seen," Heilman said. "But we're picking back up, and now we're having a hard time scheduling all the work we need to do."

On the 1TouchDigital side of the business, it looks like the introduction of a niche-specific, problem-solving product is going very well, even in a down market. "We've had a huge response," Heilman said. "I've got several dealers seeking demos, and of course with interest being all across the country, that's going to take a lot of time."

Smith Audio Visual is targeting several markets for the rollout of 1Touch Digital, and the company is also working quickly to establish a dealer network.

Heilman's business outlook does have one hitch, and it's shared by many in the industry. With new government regulations affecting banks, financing is becoming difficult, to say the least. Many integrators are shopping for a new bank, and Smith Audio Visual is among them. "I know being in a small town that the banks are hurting for good customers. The housing market has hit them hard, but not as hard here as in other places in the country," Heilman observed.

On the technology side of things, HDMI is a top concern, especially since it seems to be making other inputs obsolete. VGA and composite inputs listed on flat-panel display specifications aren't always there when the product arrives. "You have to be careful," Heilman said. "You don't know what you're going to get until it shows up."

In the problem-solving department, Heilman mentioned Z-band, which has introduced technology for distributing broadband signals over structured cabling systems in commercial buildings. "What they're doing is they're using existing ethernet in applications like hospitals or schools to push TV signals around," he explained. "You build your headend like a cable headend and you can connect cable into it. So instead of having to rewire for HD, you can run it over ethernet, and you can do multiple channels, you can do all kinds of stuff. There's just a little adapter for the back of the TV set or flat panel and you're done."

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