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Variations on a Theme

Combining audio with visual surroundings to create a fulfilling experience in themed environments.

BY DAN DALEY

RockSugar Pan Asian Kitchen creates an AV atmosphere that allows customers to immerse themselves in the Pan-Asian theme. TAB Technical Services designed a smooth audio transition from the reception room to the main dining area, installing multiple touchpanel controllers that allow the volume of each zone to be adjusted individually.

When you are in a Rainforest Café, you're in a rainforest first, a café second. Even if you are completely focused on the menu, you remain immersed in the manufactured environment, because the sound of birds and raindrops creates the perfect atmosphere for suspension of disbelief.

Keeping cinematic cues in mind is one key to achieving successful supporting audio in themed environments. Perhaps more specific to the systems integrator is keeping the audio consistent throughout what is often a multifaceted interior space. That's what Todd Bermann, owner of TAB Technical Services in Newbury Park, Calif., says was necessary in putting AV systems into the new RockSugar Pan Asian Kitchen restaurant in Los Angeles recently. The motif is Pan-Asian with a decidedly Zen angle. Diners are greeted in the low-ceilinged reception area furnished with sofas and fire pits.

"You feel like you're walking into a spa," Bermann says.

Visitors are eased into the theme with tropical nature sounds—birds chirping, water running, rain falling—played back from a DMI Music & Media Networks hard drive that can be updated via an Internet connection. The soundtrack sets the tone for the overall restaurant experience, but without clubbing the patron over the head with it.

"It's important, I think, that the sound not be obvious," Bermann says. He suggests that the volume be kept at a subtle level and that the dynamic range not be too wide to avoid particular sounds jumping out, which can cause a listener to focus on that one sound effect but lose the subliminal overall immersive experience.

Whether it's a restaurant, clothing store, or water park, patrons are coming to themed spaces as much for the experience as for the merchandise or service the company sells.

THE THEMED CHALLENGE

One of the challenges of the RockSugar install was the fact that upon entering the main dining area, diners move from the coziness of the reception room

to a huge, vaulted pagoda-like space. Bermann also configured the 15 JBL Control 25AV loudspeakers and four JBL SB210 subs so that there are more of them and they are as imperceptible as possible.

"More speakers operating at lower overall volumes was the most effective way to have the sound make the transition from the smaller space to the larger one and have the audio be seamless," he says. Loudspeakers didn't have to stay in the ceiling; numerous Buddhas and elephant statues provide plenty of cover for transducers.

Themed audio installations tend to need more specific control of the sound system than other types of commercial installations.

"A Chili's or a T.G.I. Friday's doesn't need much in the way of system control," Bermann says. "They tend to get the audio from corporate, and you hit the button and let it run. But themed environments need more than that."

That's because the theme will have its variations as time goes by, because much of the audio tends to be custom. TAB Technical Services actually created the audio sound effects for RockSugar—a rare occasion in which a systems integrator creates content as well as installs it.

"That's another reason why themed environments are different—each one tends to be unique to itself, and the sounds will undergo fine-tuning and tweaking as the concept gets refined," says Bermann, who put his previous experience as a musician and as manager of the Hollywood Bowl to good use. With most chain restaurants and retail shops, by the time they reach their 10th or so store, the template for everything—including sound—has been pretty much worked out and can be replicated note for note, so to speak, in each new outlet. Themed spaces, by contrast, can thrive on subtle changes in the music or the sound design. At RockSugar, as well as in the Islands and Cheesecake Factory installations he's done, Bermann typically installs two to three times as many touchpanel controllers, allowing for more zones to have individual control over volume and other parameters.

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SHOWING AND TELLING

Paying attention to content pays off. So says Phil Lenger, president, founder, and creative director of Show & Tell Productions—a New York creative production company that consults on and designs audio and video content for many themed spaces, including the massive Toys R Us store in Times Square. The installation took place in 2001 and has remained in the same configuration since then. Scharff Weisberg installed and integrated the system, but Show & Tell designed and continues to operate the system—including audio, video, and software control of lighting, animatronics, and the store's digital display network and exterior LED sign.

Lenger says the content, to a large extent, determined the layout of the audio system. "Laying out the sound system was an integral part of the overall design of the concept," he says.

The design called for 18 individual audio zones, the program for which changes for each department in the store. It's also updated on a seasonal basis and to support specific product campaigns. For example, during a promotional event for the DVD release of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, the store incorporated audio of Darth Vader's heavy breathing as an extra effect that could be heard throughout the store.

Certain audio themes are constant, such as the Broadway-style orchestral fanfare that greets customers at the store entrance. Shoppers will then continue to experience various musical themes as they go from Barbie shops to videogame areas and other merchandise-centric departments.

"The balance you need to strike is to direct the customers' attention to where you want them to look at a certain point, such as when they enter a certain zone, but not overwhelm them," Lenger says.

A DESTINATION

Whether it's a restaurant, clothing store, or water park, patrons are coming

to themed spaces as much for the experience as for the merchandise or service the company sells, so overdesigning a sound system for themed space can't hurt. To that end, Bermann made sure the system for RockSugar could accommodate a DJ system for special events.

"The opening of RockSugar was a major event with lots of celebrities and a very well-known DJ," he says. "That's typical of this type of space. You want to avoid forcing management to have to rent systems and interface them. Designing in facilities for special events like this allows the space to keep control over its sound, no matter how it's used."

At least one thing is a little less complicated: Surround audio does not seem to be an issue for this type of installation. "Who knows where front and center are in this kind of environment?" Lenger asks. "You're better off with high-quality mono."

During times of recession, people want to be distracted. Helping clients of themed-environment facilities get folks to come through the door and forget their troubles for a while can work out well for both the client and the integrator. **SVC**

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