

INFOCOMM 08

Time to gaze into the crystal ball as AV takes in the enormity of InfoComm 08.

Text / Christopher Holder



Samsung demonstrated its commitment to the digital signage market with this show-stopping 40-panel display.

THIS YEAR, INFOCOMM was staged in Las Vegas. And if ever there was a Mecca for the audiovisual industry it'd have to be Sin City. It's a proverbial Petri dish of AV technologies run amok. The lo-tech, hi-tech and bleeding edge stand side by side, all strobing, blaring, bleeping, burping, fading, flashing, projecting, shining... it's all going on in Vegas and it's all turned up to 11.

Similarly, the exhibition itself was anything but shy and retiring. Spread over some 50,000sqft of hall space, InfoComm is the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world when it comes to showcasing the industry.

InfoComm also acts as a generally infallible long-range forecast for our local industry conditions. Smart operators will make the trip, consult the Uncle Sam oracle and head back to Australia to ready themselves for changes in the market and inevitable movements in customer demands.

Didn't make it to InfoComm? Don't fret, AV attended on your behalf. And, after three

days of press conferences, meetings, forums and discussions, a handful of trends look to be shaping our immediate future. Some have been brewing for years, others have quickly gathered momentum — sneaking up on us, as it were.

Prior to the first public day of the show, AV attended a Manufacturers' Forum, which was a chance to hear what industry leaders were thinking about trends, challenges and the future. The panel was ably chaired by industry pundit Gary Kaye and included Gerry Remers (President and COO, Christie Digital Systems), George Feldstein (President, Crestron), Michael MacDonald (Executive Vice President, Harman Pro Group), Joe Sigrist (Sr. Vice President & General Manager, Video Solutions Division, Polycom), Jeff Porter (Executive Vice President, Scala). So, as I run through my observations of InfoComm 08 I'll drop-in the odd quote from these gents. They make for some interesting reading, I'm sure you'll agree.

AV/IT CONVERGENCE

AV/IT convergence definitely hasn't snuck up on us. Pundits have been seeing convergence in their tea leaves for a decade or more. But, dare I say it, the theory of convergence is now a reality. As far as InfoComm was concerned, it was telling to see that NXTcomm 08 had set up camp in an adjacent hall — NXTcomm being jammed packed full of IT and telecommunication products. Convergence was also evident in the fact that the NSCA show is now subsumed into InfoComm, so you could safely say that audiovisual, IT, and entertainment technologies were all under the one roof.

As far as the gear goes, the most obvious manifestation of AV/IT convergence is the ubiquitous ethernet port, and manufacturers are seeing a much higher sales rate on network gear as opposed to non-network gear. What's being piped down these millions of kilometres of Cat5/e and Cat6? Everything! Especially now that analogue video is routinely converted into digital video and transmitted via Cat5/e.

It was interesting to hear what Crestron boss George Feldstein had to say on this subject. You want to see AV/IT convergence in action? Then cop a load of Crestron's hush-hush dealings with Microsoft!

"Part of what we're working on with Microsoft is streamlining the technology behind the transmission of audio and video over IP networks. So we're working on getting digital video and audio into a projector, or for digital signage... It's based on our knowledge of AV and Microsoft's knowledge of IT. So if you buy one of our Reference models for use with digital signage or a projector then you'll also have access to control and RoomView infrastructure. We're fulfilling my ultimate vision for convergence."

But what about the vexed question of traditional AV turf being invaded by the IT industry? George Feldstein again: "Last year [at this forum] I pleaded with the AV guys to get IT-savvy and hire IT guys, so the IT industry wouldn't take over the AV industry — because I'm a member of the AV industry not the IT industry. Now I think the pendulum has swung in favour of AV. For one, there's the total integration of digital audio and

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/Jeff Porter, Scala

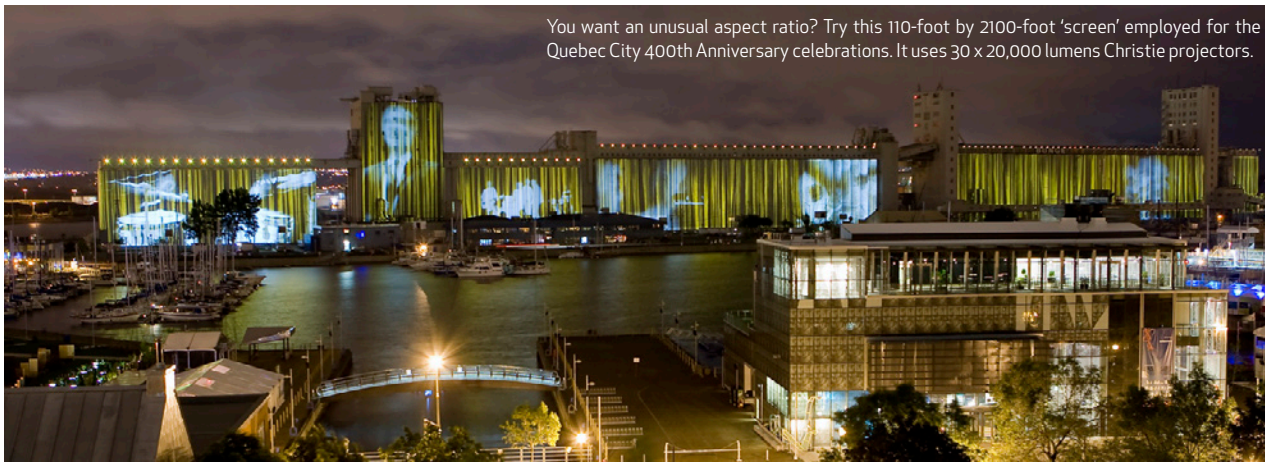
digital video in the AV world. I mean, most of our installations transmit video digitally over Cat5. Many of our new products and processes will, right from the get go, convert analogue video to hi-def digital video. So now it brings that transmission of that video/audio info back into the AV realm.

“You think about it, what's the difference between an AV guy and a IT guy? Well the IT guy knows how to program those magic routers and switchers and the IT guy runs Cat5 wire and Cat6. Now the AV guys are running more Cat5 and Cat6 than the IT guys! And many are learning the routers. In future you'll see more and more transmission via ethernet and the network backbone. And, again, this is not speculation, we have new products on the floor that do this and are developing a ton of new products along those lines. Again, the AV professionals will need to be smart about what the IT people know. IP addresses, routers, switchers, static IPs...”

And what about audio? Will its relationship with ethernet be a little less ‘complicated’ in future? Harman's Michael MacDonald had this to say: “Audio is two or three years behind video in networking products — it's happening, but three things need to happen before it becomes commonplace. First up, it's gotta be standards-based ethernet. It can't be home brew.... or, as one of our engineers keeps telling me all the time, it can't be ‘FredNet’. Secondly, the network port has to be a standard feature on every piece of gear we make. When you go to the level of it being optional then the economics falls apart — the cost goes up and then very few people use it. Lastly, we need a common transport protocol. Until we get that, it's going to be difficult. There's a lot of rumbling and I think we're close.”

DIGITAL SIGNAGE

Speaking of ‘Fred’, you'd have to be Blind Freddy to not see that digital signage is going absolutely gangbusters. InfoComm featured all the big players in the flat screen market. And whether it was Samsung, Sony, Pioneer, NEC, Panasonic, Pioneer, Toshiba, Hitachi, LG et al, each were demonstrating how their products would work in retail, exhibition halls, airports and the like. Many, like Panasonic, Samsung or Sony, were also selling the merits of their own digital signage software. It'll be interesting to see how the chips fall in this regard. It's hard to see how third-party providers can be knocked off their perch — after all, what integrator wants



You want an unusual aspect ratio? Try this 110-foot by 2100-foot 'screen' employed for the Quebec City 400th Anniversary celebrations. It uses 30 x 20,000 lumens Christie projectors.

to be locked into a relationship with just one screen manufacturer? Certainly that's the way the Scala's Jeff Porter sees things: "The digital signage market is booming – we have 75,000 systems now in 60 countries. Market reports rate the digital signage sector as growing at a compounded annual growth of 35% — we've seen that higher at Scala."

"So with digital signage growing at such a rate, it's an opportunity for AV professionals to take a look and ask: 'how can I expand my business into more than just hanging screens and running wires?'. It could be the chance to have an application presence that allows you to move up the food chain and provide additional value-add services."

"Screens are popping up everywhere and there are opportunities for everyone to take advantage in these different venues; from education, to outdoor, to car dealers, real estate, travel agents, shopping malls, gaming, corporate lobbies, museums, schools, universities, florists and airports. We see it everyday, but that's where the opportunities are in digital signage."

So what about the IT/AV convergence as it pertains to digital signage? Who stands to make the most out of the digital signage boom? Jeff Porter again: "The likes of the Ciscos of the world haven't really done the math. After the screens are put up I don't think the IT guys know what it takes to feed the digital signage 'monster'. Let's say you want to provide unique content for all these different screen locations and you want the right message hitting at the right time and to the right people. If you actually do the math on how many mpeg videos you'd need to produce and find out how much bandwidth you need to achieve that — not to mention how much it costs to produce all that content — it doesn't add up! So you've got to have a smart AV system

that actually renders content on-the-fly at the point of playback. As a result, you're seeing a lot of screens being integrated such that each one is IP addressable. So you put the smarts *in* the screen and all of sudden you can send different content to different places very easily and without having to have millions of megabytes flying through the network. Pre-rendered content that you couldn't cost-effectively produce at the end of it. So think about what it takes to feed the monster... "

ASPECT RATIOS

As you can imagine, all of the big (and not so big) projection players had all their gear wound up to 11, chucking out some extremely impressive images. Sanyo's ultra-short throw projector (for placing in compact/hard to reach places) was impressive, but the theme of the show was more about unconventional aspect ratios. It seems that the decision to go from 4:3 to 16:9 is about as mundane as moving from Corn Flakes to Wheaties. Instead why not consider a 20:1 aspect ratio?! Christie's Gerry Remers has: "Using blending, we're seeing a move away from 4:3 and 16:9 — there's now the freedom to move away from established screen sizes and screen types. For example, for the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City the government there is putting on a large display. They'll have 30 x 20,000 lumen projectors running at a 20:1 aspect ratio — 110 feet high and 2100 feet wide. So this talk of 16:9 vs 4:3 is kinda irrelevant when you're talking about these other aspect ratios. Another example is for a museum in Washington. They have a 90:10 display using five edge-blended DLP projectors. I think this move away from conventional aspect ratios represents a huge opportunity for AV dealers to capitalise on new technology, a technology that's coming down in cost and complexity.

VIDEO CONFERENCING GOES MAINSTREAM

And, yes, if we didn't already know it, video conferencing is now a standard means of doing business. Polycom's Joe Sigrist had this to say: "If you look at the interest created by video communications, it's certainly expanded beyond the Facilities Department or the IT Department, it's made its way into the 'C Suite'. So the question is why? It's a great way to communicate between geographically remote locations, especially in these times to save costs, and it's green. Microsoft with the way its OCS (Office Communication Server) initiative is going, video is a big part of their plans. So we're seeing a mainstreaming of video, and changes to the way we all do business."

That's it for now, but I look forward to seeing more familiar faces at next year's Infocomm. ↵

Video conferencing is clearly no longer the niche luxury it once was. And now thanks to sky-rocketing fuel prices it makes sound financial sense for business to invest in VC technology.

