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A Few Shining Lights at NSCA



Written by Dan Daley
May 22, 2007

High-tech users means the lighting industry can find profits in low-tech gear.

The National Systems Contractor Show (NSCA), which was held in Orlando in mid-March, reflects an industry trying to figure itself out. If you didn't know what the show was about — putatively, commercial AV systems design and installation — and you were suddenly, magically plopped down in the middle of the hall, it could take you the better part of the day to figure it out from the hodge-podge of technologies that make up media systems these days.

This bewilderment was compounded by the presence — in some cases for the first time — of a few strictly lighting companies. Amid the video screens large and small and the audio systems ranging from large line arrays to speakers hidden in plaster lawn ornaments, there were moving lights and LEDs. "Convergence" was the catch-all term used to explain the lighting presence, but Corwin Hamm, an engineer and consultant liaison at projector maker Barco, had a slightly more elegant explanation for it. Looking up at images dancing across a circular pavilion hanging above yet another moving-images booth, he observed, "As lighting becomes more sophisticated, it's getting harder to tell where a conventional display ends and lighting begins. Lighting is becoming a display in and of itself."

Lighting systems that can project static and moving messages onto virtually any surface are indeed rivaling the digital signage that has been the still-somewhat-ambiguous darling of the installed-media industry for the better part of a decade. That's why it made sense for lighting to make a showing at NSCA. "Lighting is no longer able to limit its 'sell' to LDI only," comments Tony Hansen, systems designer for Techni-Lux, which was for the first time showing its wares at NSCA. "Lighting has to branch out into other areas, just as you're seeing technologies like LED and video converge. A more diverse business needs a more diverse show environment."

YouTube Lighting

Hansen sees another kind of convergence that will have significance for lighting: the transition of video from an expensive profession with limited access to a craft accessible to virtually anyone. "Video production, whether it's movies or television shows or signage, is moving from the domain of the big players to the realm of home and garage studios, and they will need lighting, too," he says. "Once people doing video on their laptops realize how much more lighting brings to a production, I think you're going to see an explosion in demand for lighting."

However bright the future may be, literally, small players won't have the same budgets the major seven studios can summon to light their work. Hansen says that means a re-emphasis on the basics of the business. "The PAR can was introduced at Woodstock, and it hasn't changed since, and it's still our number-one-selling item, not the LED or the moving light," he says, noting that Techni-Lux will re-introduce

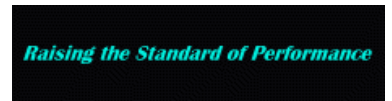
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the PAR can with a new line of them later this year. "Universal Studios doesn't need any more PAR cans, but people working in their garages will, and I'm expecting a surge in demand for the basic elements of lighting systems. The industry is going to go back to its roots."

It's also going to other trade shows. Hansen says CEDIA and CES are possible show venues for Techni-Lux in the future, as is NAMM, the musical instrument show that increasingly overshadows AES, which was once the sole bastion of professional audio. In fact, the dynamic that saw music recording go from an expensive and complicated proposition to a ubiquitously dispersed and economically disposable one is exactly the transformation that all technologies supporting media have experienced and will continue to undergo. Lighting may be getting to the evolutionary party a little late, but figure that YouTube, VEOH and the hordes of other user-generated content sites on the Internet will soon grasp what any grip could tell you: better lighting will give anything an edge.

This transformation is not going to take place solely at the entry level; as Hamm notes, sophisticated lighting and projection technologies will increasingly interact — and possibly challenge — video-based displays. "There's an integration of animation and lighting graphics going on," he says. "It's the same in how lighting itself is becoming more digital, with LEDs, just as video has become digital."

Tracking Cues

However, lighting is also coming to a sector that's still trying to figure itself out. Where the residentially oriented CEDIA expo continues to expand, NSCA seemed quiet. That's surprising, given the expanded ubiquity of installed media technology in the commercial and industrial sector. Trade-show burn could certainly account for part of this; some exhibitors felt the show should be folded into other, larger expositions, with NSCA continuing its role as organizer of the training programs.

But other dynamics are also at work, including Moore's Law, that sees more capable technologies at ever-lower costs, including products that are crossing over from the consumer side, producing price pressures. The commercial AV sector may be still figuring itself out, as is its main trade expo, but it's safe to say that its future is going to include lighting. Just as certain — lighting is going to undergo its own desktop/laptop revolution.

Got a well-lit YouTube video? Send the link to ddaley@plsn.com.

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