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The Magic of Sights-N-Sounds

Custom installer **Joe Calise** explains what you should expect from your dealer's showroom.

By Dennis Burger

Photography by Mike Sculco/DigiMax Studios

Use Your ILLUSION



Fans of stage magicians invariably fall into two distinct categories: those who are clueless to the techniques of the performer and revel in the mystery of the unknown, and those who are hip to the secrets yet still feel an overwhelming sense of awe in the presence of an amazing conjuror. When it comes to his own custom installation business, Joe Calise, president of Sights-N-Sounds in Seaford, N.Y., makes no bones about the fact that he is fostering an illusion of sorts—creating the impression of a comfortable residential atmosphere for his clients, while still maintaining a professional retail environment—but he also works hard to show his customers that he holds no aces up his sleeve.

In this interview, Calise explains what clients should expect when they enter a dealer's showroom, as well as his Penn & Teller-esque attitude toward busting the myth that



custom installation is the exclusive domain of the ultra high-end.

DENNIS BURGER: *How important is a carefully crafted showroom to your business?*

JOE CALISE: It's crucial. It is the first impression, after all. I want to create an experience in my store that you remember. As soon as someone walks into the store, they're seeing a lot of things happening—LCDs and DLPs are turning on, music is changing, the picture frame is rolling up with the plasma revealed behind it—and all of it combines to give the customer that wow factor.

DB: *Is wow factor enough, though?*

JC: It isn't. You also have to make the customer comfortable, and that's something we had to learn the hard way. Our current location is actually the third for us, and this time I tried to apply all I've learned about what I did wrong in each prior location. When I had my first office, I had a customer that was going to buy a \$25,000 Runco CRT projector. We had a fairly nice store, but we were off a main road in an industrial park, and the customer said my location made me feel kind of fly-by-night.

Sights-N-Sounds' home theater demo room may be small—only 110 square feet—but its open-sided layout provides an irresistible invitation for passing customers. A front-projection video system and comfortable theater recliners create a more cinematic experience.

That really shot a lightbulb off in my head, and I realized that if we're going to be a serious player in this business, we have got to have a lot more credibility in our location. So from there we moved into our first showroom, with a nice retail location and a 400-square-foot theater room. But nobody ever went inside the theater room, so it opened my eyes to what we needed to do.

In our current location, we created a theater that's about 110 square feet—a very small room. It's also a three-sided room, with the fourth wall being open to the main traffic run walking through the showroom. Our old theater was big and beautiful, but we've discovered that customers feel a bit intimidated walking into a dark room with somebody they don't know. So here they're in an open area, and they can take in the theater all at once, and there's still an easy out if they do go inside, but from the inside it gives the illusion of actually being in a dedicated room and hearing the acoustical difference.

DB: *What about the current trend of building show homes in lieu of retail showrooms, though? Don't you feel that this gives the customer a better sense of how custom installation works in an actual residential setting?*

JC: I absolutely think people feel a lot more comfortable walking into a store than they do walking into a home. Most of our customers tell us at the end of a job, 'If you ever want to bring somebody by, feel free to use my house as a show-case,' but we haven't taken too many of them up on it. It's nice to know that we can, but I think you can build a homelike



environment very effectively in a showroom, and you can do so many things that can't be done in a show home.

DB: *What sorts of things?*

JC: For example, we have two big racks in an equipment room adjacent to the theater. I initially framed it out for a door to be there, so no one could get to the back of the rack, but before I put the door up I thought to myself, 'Why would I not want to show off the back of our rack?' We ended up leaving it open so that people could walk back there, see how we label our work, neat-ten the wires, dress our rack, and see the back of the components. People love seeing the nuts and bolts.

DB: *Just not in their own homes.*

JC: Exactly. And it's changed the way we demonstrate the equipment: 'This unit

has the ability to do Zone 2; it has three video inputs in addition to your DVD, instead of just one input.' You can't really show that in a show home. We combined the two concepts: We try to have a show home atmosphere in the store, to show the lifestyle setting and how the equipment interacts with it, but at the same time, we can go behind the walls and reveal even more.

DB: *I also noticed that you have a full wall of architectural speakers, something that really wouldn't work in a residence.*

JC: That's definitely another advantage. We can demonstrate to people the difference between a 5-inch and an 8-inch in-wall speaker. And, for example, the customer can compare the four different levels of speaker that Niles offers on the spot, in the same environment.

Looking behind the walls also helps



people realize how they can build their system over time. Maybe they only want to spend \$600 on a surround-sound receiver today, but they realize that if they buy that \$1,000 receiver today, then tomorrow they can do more with it.

DB: *One usually doesn't think of the \$1,000 receiver in conjunction with custom installation, though. Most installers spend more time emphasizing the half-million-dollar jobs. Is the entry-level system a significant portion of your business? And how do you convince someone in the market for an entry-level surround-sound system that they need a custom installer?*

JC: Well, the so-called entry-level system is the bread and butter of our industry. The \$1,000 receiver is one thing, but most people look at the connections on the back and have no idea what those things are. We know how to make it

work, and work properly. Custom installation is more about education than hardware. One of the things we always tell people is we have to have a budget in mind when they come in because whether it's a \$5,000 budget, or a \$50,000 budget, it doesn't matter—my job is to give them what they're looking for.

And we definitely don't turn down those \$5,000 jobs. Those are the jobs we go get done in a day. Those are the jobs that pay the bills and keep the lights on. The \$500,000 jobs, we take those too, but we have to be very careful and precise on how we manage them because if we don't manage them correctly, one job like that could put you out of business. And I think that's what happens to a lot of these small companies that start up and get those big jobs and think it's going to be easy for them to go in there and get it done in three days.

Although Sights-N-Sounds' showroom includes a fairly standard-looking retail space, it's actually designed in part to show off custom-installation highlights, such as a plasma TV screen hidden in a picture frame above a fireplace and an in-wall touchscreen remote control system.

When we're running two or three six-figure jobs at one time, there are always days where we can't go because the floors are being refinished or the walls are being painted. I can't keep my installers home every other day and expect them to come back to work for me. So the small jobs are great. We're doing a \$20,000 job today, and the beauty of it is that we'll be done in one day. So those are the jobs that keep our doors open and keep the business flowing. HE

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