



# CUSTOM home electronics THE FUTURE IS NOW

When people think of a wired or networked home, something along the lines of Bill Gates' mansion may come to mind. Many homeowners think features like home automation and home theaters are only for the extremely wealthy or hardcore "tech geeks." While that may have once been the case, countless homes on the South Shore today have custom electronics systems. This can mean anything from simple computer networking to multi-room music systems or a full-blown home theater room.

Across the country, such technology has become more and more common. The Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association reports that nearly a quarter of U.S. residents have a home theater system, and according to Parks Associates, a leading consumer technology market research firm, sixty-eight percent of U.S. builders offer structured wiring.

Despite the increasing demand for custom home electronics systems, many consumers are still confused about the different technologies and what it all means. Luckily, there are a growing number of custom electronics firms to help buyers decipher it all and decide what is best for their needs and budget.

Advanced Communication Technologies (ACT) of Hingham is a residential electronics firm that designs and installs custom home theater, audio, video, communications and security systems, and the cabling infrastructure to support them. ACT's office and showroom is on Route 53 near Queen Anne's Corner. The company does work in Boston, on the South Shore, north



and west of Boston, and on Cape Cod.

The company was founded in 2002. It started with just two employees and a small office space. Today the firm has ten employees and three showrooms. This past November, ACT won the Gold award for Best Media Room at the Builder's Association of Greater Boston's annual PRISM Awards ceremony. The firm's work has been featured in local and national consumer and industry magazines, including *Electronic House*, *New England Home*, *Electronic Home Ideas Guide*, and *CEPro*.

Although ACT offers its clients state-of-the-art technology, the company is founded on the good, old-fashioned premises of customer service and integrity. "Many of our clients come to us with misconceptions about equipment, technology, and compatibility. We take the mystery out of the technology for them," explains managing director Paul Diggin. "We want our customers to think of us as the experts. We can explain the technology, what the best solutions are for them, and how to integrate systems, and they can focus on the fun aspects of the end result."

Keith Bartholomew, director of operations, adds, "For us, everything about a job comes down to service. If there's a problem, or something's wrong, or customers just have a question, they call us and we handle it."



The company's strong focus on customer service has been a key to its success. Many of its jobs are referrals from past clients. ACT's average home entertainment customer spends between \$20,000 and \$50,000 on a project. Each project is unique and varies in scope, size, and equipment, but the common thread is that the firm educates its clients at each step.

"Whether it's a new home under construction or a renovation, people can be inundated with decisions," Bartholomew says. "When it comes to home entertainment, we start with the 'wish list' and encourage clients to put everything on it. Is phone, cable or satellite TV wiring involved? What about networking computers or shared Internet access? Will there be speakers in every room? Out on the deck? Surround sound in the family room? They look to us for help in deciding what to do, even right down to where to put things. Which is good, because that's why we're here. It's what we're good at."

Once the 'wish list' is established, ACT produces an itemized, room-by-room blueprint so that the customer can evaluate each proposed system component based on price. "We're purposely not bound to any particular manufacturer as the only solution," Diggin says. "We often specify or recommend products because we know the manufacturer's reputation for service or for honoring a warranty, and they may not always be brands the customer is familiar with. But we really do our homework."

Not every client can do everything they want all at once. Many homeowners develop a comprehensive custom electronics plan for their entire home, and then implement it in stages. ACT offers some tips to help homeowners make smart decisions about electronics systems for their homes.

Wire for everything now. If a client is building or remodeling a home, ACT recommends wiring it with a plan for future needs. While no one can guarantee what the future will look like, structured cabling supports everything from shared broadband Internet access for today to future add-ons like multi-room audio or central control systems for lighting and HVAC. One day, your refrigerator could even order groceries for you.

When buying a television or video display, the most important thing is to look at all of the options. A good A/V professional should be knowledgeable about different equipment and be able answer your questions intelligently and point out the differences in different displays. Ask about the manufacturer's warranty; all companies offer third party extended warranties. Ask about servicing. Does the seller see a lot of issues with a

particular display? Ask how the service is provided by the authorized service companies.

Insist on integrated systems. As you buy new electronic components, make sure you shop for equipment that can be hooked up together and operated with one, easy to use control system.

Don't think you have to put up with hard to use, multiple remote controls. Easy to use, all-in-one remote controls are available for any system. You can even have them custom programmed so they make perfect sense to you.

Consult a professional. Designing and installing reliable, easy to use systems that add real quality to your lifestyle is the goal of custom electronics professionals. Check to see if the company you're considering has industry-certified technicians. It is important that the proper cabling is used to connect flat panel displays with other components. Also, many installers don't know how to properly calibrate a video display to get the best performance from it.

Increase your service expectations. Your home electronics system is a big investment. Hire professionals that will provide you with extensive options, comprehensive designs, complete installation, and in-home service for your systems.

"We want to help every customer make the right choices," Diggin says. "We're not in a transactional business; we're in a relationship business. We know you'll have home-technology needs in the future, and we're here to fulfill them now...and then."

Advanced Communication Technologies (ACT), 34 Whiting Street, Hingham, (781) 741-5959. On the web: [www.actces.com](http://www.actces.com). Paul Diggin writes a regular column on home technology for South Shore Magazine