



For Home
Entertainment
get into
ACT

By Scott Pickard



My, how the definition of “home entertainment” has changed.

A generation ago, the average homeowner’s living room was equipped with little more than the latest model TV (perhaps built into a fancy furniture-like cabinet) and a large, plainly obvious multi-component stereo system replete with turntable, tape deck, and speakers that sounded (and looked) imposing – all linked by yards of wiring.

Now, “home entertainment” means plasma-screen, high-definition television that’s as fashionable as it is functional, whole-house audio systems that are discreetly heard but not seen and computer networking and wireless Internet capability every bit as slick as a business.

Welcome to the wonderful world of Advanced Communication Technologies (ACT), a custom design and installation firm specializing in the modern definition of home entertainment, along with those of communications, networking, and security systems. From their new Hingham office and showroom on Route 53 near Queen Anne’s Corner, ACT offers both technical and product expertise and project management skills supplemented with a dollop of good old-fashioned customer service.

“We take the mystery out of state-of-the-art technology,” says managing director Paul Diggin. “People come to us with misconceptions about equipment, technology, compatibility. We want our customers to think of us as experts who can make it easy for them.”

Those are comforting words to consumers contemplating a new or dramatically upgraded home entertainment system but who don’t have nearly enough knowledge about what to buy, where to get it, who should install it, how to make it work and – most importantly – whom to ask to get the right answers.

“When we do work for our clients, we take responsibility for the whole job, start to finish,” says Keith Bartholomew, ACT’s director of operations. “It all comes down to

service. If there’s a problem, or something’s wrong, or customers just have a question, they call us and we solve the problem, no matter how large or small.”

That soup-to-nuts approach is already paying off. Business for the not-quite two-year-old company has never been better as a combination of new residential construction and major home renovations has resulted in significant demand for ACT’s expertise in matching the customer with the right products at the right price. What was initially a two-man shop (Bartholomew and Diggin) at the company’s inception quickly expanded as both saw the potential for a full-service, custom firm that would, in Diggin’s words, “do everything: design, specify, procure product, install, integrate, and service. We thought we’d start off doing much more consulting but client needs caused ACT to become a full-service, custom firm a full year before we thought we would,” he says with a smile. Why?

“People are putting more money into their homes,” Diggin says, “and they want to fully enjoy them. Also, our customers want one-stop shopping. We cover the whole spectrum of today’s home entertainment market: wiring for phones, computers, security systems, multi-room audio, satellite or cable TV, as well as all the equipment itself.”

ACT’s average home entertainment customer spends between \$10,000 and \$35,000 and views the expenditure as an investment, whether for their own enjoyment, to increase their home’s value, or to create what Diggin calls a “controlled environment” for adolescent sons and daughters (and their friends) to be comfortable under the parental roof. The options in every project are unique and numerous and vary in scope, size, and brand, but ACT prides itself on helping its customers navigate the confusing home entertainment waters.

“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 a '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 options and help in deciding what to do, even right down to where to put things. We're experts at all of those details. We even have a planning page on our web site that helps clients to begin thinking about the types of features that are important to them."

Once the 'wish list' is established, ACT produces an itemized, room-by-room blueprint so the customer can evaluate each proposed system component based on desired features and price. "We're purposely not bound to any particular manufacturer," 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."

Just ask Andrew Jaffe. He enlisted ACT to handle every aspect of an elaborate, multi-faceted home entertainment system installation during the recent renovation of his 2,600 square-foot, two-story Boston condominium and couldn't be happier.

"A friend recommended ACT to me as a company that would do top-quality, clean, efficient work and that's exactly what I found," Jaffe says. "They worked closely with my architect and contractor, understood my needs, and weren't trying to oversell. They did everything and did it well."

That ability to build solid relationships with contractors, developers, and architects has been another key success factor, according to ACT's director of marketing, Jack Cassidy.



"We want them to consider us as their technology partners and we encourage them to incorporate our expertise into the services and options they offer to their clients."

Given that ACT knows the lay of the land as well as anyone, it seemed logical to ask them to assess the hottest current trends in home entertainment. Some you may guess, while others may come as a surprise.

"Flat screen TV is very big right now," Diggin says, "and prices have come down recently." "Whole-house" or multi-room audio systems, which feature speakers throughout the home paired with individual listening options, are also among ACT's most popular installations. Add in Surround Sound (a technology that was once limited to theatres), home theatre, and universal remotes (which now can

control an array of as many as 12 different home components) and you've got a representative sampling of what you'll find in ACT's showroom.

And, Diggin advises, the days of showing off your home entertainment components are largely over.

"Blending function with aesthetics is something we and our customers strive for, and we like to hide a lot of the equipment now," he says.

"Speakers are built into walls, plasma TVs have a lot of appeal because they can be hung to look like pictures, and a lot of the wiring is either hidden or non-existent."

It's ironic that as Americans become more enamored with (and dependent on) technology at home, we're increasingly unable to understand it. Most of us want to buy the latest home entertainment products, bring them inside, plug them in and enjoy them (or be assured that our contractor/builder can point us in the right direction), but it's not nearly so simple. That's fine with ACT - in fact, it further reinforces their niche.

"There's more of a need for what we do than there's ever been," Bartholomew says. "With more choices and more complicated technology, people just don't have the time or the desire to do a lot of research or read a lot of manuals to understand it all."

"We want to help every customer make the right choices," Diggin adds. "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."

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