IT'S TIME TO TAKE THE BUILDING BACK

Sound masking: a tipping point for AV.

BY JONATHAN LEONARD

Given enough time, history will always repeat itself. Yes, we grow and learn from our past experiences but, for the most part, our business and lifecycles move ahead, and if we miss something on the first go-around, there is a high probability it will come back around...usually with some extra gusto.

For the sound masking market, it's been a long, circuitous route with regard to working with sound contractors/integrators and AV, but it's back, stronger than ever before, with new, advanced technologies and in a position where success and profitable growth from integration of the product is a certainty.

Background

A quick history: When commercial sound masking systems were first introduced in the 60's and 70's, sound contractors and acoustical engineers usually were the ones who delivered these systems to market. These early sound masking systems were techno-logically limited and their designs were more concerned with providing privacy than with comfort. No real metric for comfort existed. This resulted in masking systems creating spaces that were private but that sounded harsh and uncomfortable. So much so, that, too often, the masking systems used in these spaces were turned off because most occupants would not trade comfort for privacy.

In the mind of the integrator, the benefits of providing sound masking did not outweigh the difficulties in tuning it and managing a space acoustically. For the most part, at this early time, the AV industry walked away from sound masking or used it only sparingly in high-security situations and for spot treatments where privacy was considered more important than acoustic comfort.

However, the need for masking and proper acoustics continued to grow and, as the design of corporate office spaces changed, so did the need and focus on acoustics in these spaces. Designs now incorporated higher performing products—ceiling tiles with high NRCs (Noise Reduction Coefficient), carpeting to absorb footfalls, workstation partitions to block sound, absorptive fabric panels—and include more stringent ASHRAE (American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers) standards for quieter HVAC systems. This resulted in ambient background levels dropping, and building environments grew quieter...too quiet.

S/N Ratios Were Off

Essentially, in these spaces, the signal-to-noise ratios were way off, with incoming speech being well above the background sound, even in closed offices. Masking was the answer but, at the time, the AV industry no longer seemed to want to address this issue. Instead, these problems were addressed by another segment: the furniture industry.

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Already working hard at creating good environments and exceptional work experiences, this industry, and leaders such as Herman Miller, Knoll and other furniture manufacturers, saw the importance of incorporating proper acoustics in an environment by using sound masking. Furniture dealers naturally understood comfort and productivity, and carefully picked up quality sound masking lines that addressed not only aesthetics and function, but performance, privacy and comfort.

This market intrinsically understood that office space has to allow people to do two things: collaborate and think. In designing environments, their intent was to enable people within these spaces to team and communicate together without disrupting others from doing their "thinking" work. They saw that "quiet space" would never allow both of these things to go on simultaneously. They also watched as communication and teaming practices continued to grow, as did the use of technologies that produced noise such as voice-activated equipment, computers with speakers, speaker phones and the use of cell phones. They understood the need to address acoustics as part of a comprehensive approach to the environment and embraced sound masking as part of their design practices.

Meanwhile, the sound masking market and its product offerings continued to evolve. The simpler systems that the furniture makers initially embraced grew to become more sophisticated and incorporated network operability and user interface. Clients asked for products that could be integrated into their building systems and provide a dashboard for system functionality and diagnostics. They wanted reporting capabilities and ways to get information from raw data that, eventually, could become intelligence, and could be used to provide metrics for system status and performance. In the market, everything was becoming smarter, even sound masking.

More Integration

As the sound masking market grew, the understanding of the criteria for acoustic comfort and network operabil-

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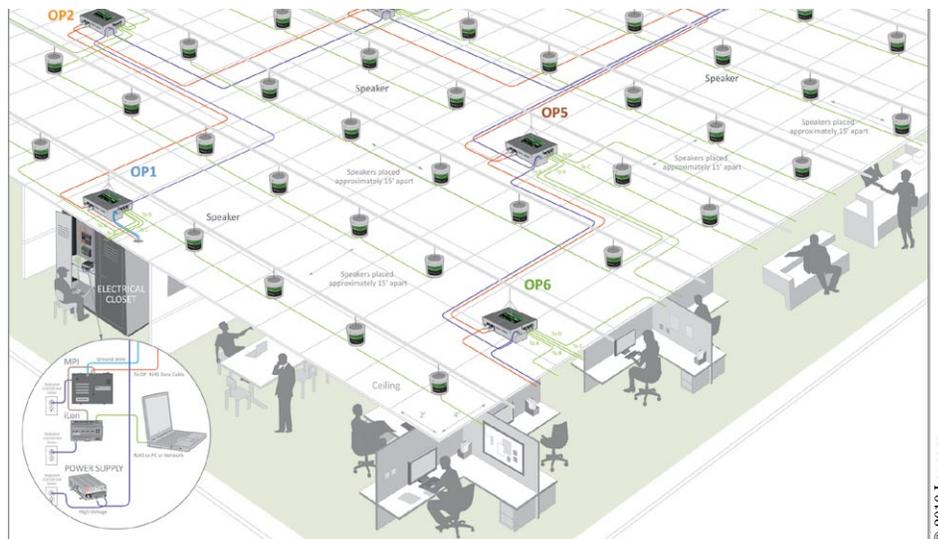
Quality sound masking creates environments that support both communication and concentration while providing speech privacy and acoustical comfort. Networked systems, such as this one, can distribute sound masking, paging and music through in-plenum (as shown) or through direct-fired speakers and controlled manually, remotely or through an intuitive GUI.

ity became more and more integrated into masking specifications, and the systems integration market began to respond.

Now, with IP-addressable devices, network operability and easy to use GUIs, network sound masking systems have been embraced by forward-thinking AV systems integrators and incorporated into their packages, not only for masking, but for quality paging, mass notification and music distribution.

The fit for this market and sound masking is near perfect. With the marriage of product technology and a market that is completely comfortable with terms such as open platform, systems integration and unified communications, it truly is time for the systems integrator to take advantage of this market opportunity.

Is sound masking leaving the furniture industry? The answer is no. Quality spatial design is at the heart of everything that that industry does, and the role of proper acoustics is as important as ever. Building with acoustics in mind and creating great space is what they are driven to do. In fact, many progressive furniture dealers have incorporated AV services in their scope of solutions because they see the synergy between offering great technical products and great environments.

However, today, many systems integrators are also getting involved with executing more and more projects as they are, indeed, qualified to understand the nuances of quality sound and the importance of creating excellent audio experiences.

It Is Time

It is time for systems integrators to step beyond the boardroom to look at whole floors, entire facilities and multiple building campus-wide projects and see the opportunity that incorporating audio solutions like sound masking, paging, mass communication and music can provide. If ever there was a profitable time to take advantage of the sound masking market, the timing is now. Drivers such as proven performance and market acceptance for the solution, as well as the increasing need for privacy and acoustical comfort and the ever-present need for intelligible emergency communication systems, are leading the market's growth.

In addition, there are LEED credits for acoustics and for sound masking in healthcare, new construction and commercial interiors, making sound masking not only a good idea, but one that supports sustainable practice and design. Moreover, work in some government facilities dictates that

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of Las Vegas.

The trend toward integration-friendly components was noticeable in mounts and accessories. Peerless-AV introduced 60 new products, including a Digital Menu Board Kit designed for flexible configuration of displays from 13 to 102 inches. With the kit, multiple displays can be mounted side-by-side, at any desired height and in any configuration, in three simple steps.

Open protocols, including JavaScript and SVG (scalable vector graphics), were featured in media players, such as the low power-consumption, solid-state HMP200 Hyper Media Player from SpinetiX. Fusion software is pre-installed in the HMP200 and there are no additional user license or subscription fees. ClearOne entered the signage market with its IMPRESS media player, designed for use with its IP-based VIEW system. This is another versatile, "open" new unit, providing 1080p content layouts, both Adobe Flash and H.264 video playback capabilities, and remote access and control from Windows, Apple, Android or BlackBerry devices.

In response to the growing use of interactive signage for wayfinding, Visix introduced WayPoint, a software package that combines selected content layout modules that can be customized with logo, colors and branding. These modules include an interactive Google map with 10 points of interest or a custom interactive wayfinding map, signage playlists, and auto-updating of news, weather and RSS feeds.

The emerging convergence of interactive signage, collaboration and conferencing technologies was also visible at Info-Comm, where signage providers demoed various products to support conferencing applications. Visix unveiled its Power over Ethernet Interactive Meeting Room Sign, and X2O Media introduced Xpresenter ICE (Integrated Conference Experience) to enhance meetings with content from conference sessions and extend meeting participation through remote applications.

Although manufacturers continued to push the envelope with innovative signage solutions at Info-Comm, the central focus was on more cost-effective solutions for customers, and an increase in the attention paid to the bottom-line concerns of their integration and channel partners.

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of the most desired production items. Moving lights are on nearly everyone's Christmas list. If you are not up to speed about moving lights and other new types of light fixtures, you should be; these fixtures are on the "want lists" of HOWs of all sizes. HOW leaders are motivated by the idea that movers can be programmed to spot or light up multiple locations within a drama or musical, while also eliminating the need for lifts to aim lights.

The Fall schedule represents a cumulative number of holidays that are important for HOWs. These holidays are special times when HOWs can present their faith to a large number of people within their community. In 2011, HOWs desire to use communication technologies more than they ever have in history to enhance the holiday season. For us to take advantage of these opportunities, I believe that now is the time to act, to communicate with leaders about their needs for the Fall schedule. That is what I believe. I want to know what you believe. ∎

DOWN TO BUSINESS

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in developing these new entrants, not just training. *We* must, *InfoComm* must, *manufacturers* must all play a role in developing curricula that teach not only current audio, video, control and network technology, but also the theory, math, science, application, design, social impact, business and management of what we do. We must promote ourselves early and often to the candidates likely to enter our industry. Moving in this direction will help us all produce new and more AV/IT professionals.

If there was ever a time to rethink how we find, develop and incent new people in our industry, this is it, and it is the collective responsibility of all of us in order to sustain and retain the industry. ∎

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each project must be LEED Silver. And in these same buildings, there will be a mandate to provide speech privacy. Correctly designed sound masking is the solution to deliver this.

Systems integrators are constantly trying to differentiate themselves and to diversify their services, while trying to integrate as many applications as possible into the spaces they create. AV should provide leadership in these buildings. As part of the audio experience, sound masking, paging and music should be part of this.

At a recent industry event, we listened to a key presenter in the industry as he described AV's challenge to be at the table with architects and building owners. Here is our advice: If you want a seat at this table, serve up something that acoustically tunes the space to positively affect every occupant. Give architects, clients and owners an experience. Don't just talk boardroom: Talk people, talk about the entire building interior. Office occupants spend much of their career fighting the distractions in an office, but wouldn't it be so much better if they could get their thinking work done and enjoy that beautifully crafted space?

We are, indeed, at a tipping point in the sound masking world, and systems integrators, and unified communication contractors are back at the party where we make noise. ∎