

## Who Really Decides?

Fending off outside influences on a project

By Michael MacDonald

Imagine this situation: you've designed a fantastic sound system for a major client event, and when the bid is let, word comes back that one or more manufacturers are approaching your client directly to sell their products and upstage your design.

They go about substituting equipment so that it maximizes the use of their models, and you're probably not consulted. But even if so, you're told that it will work as well or better than the original design, and further, that you should be happy with the changes.

Wow! Does this really happen? More than one might imagine.

When all is said and done, who really decides what gear winds up in a project? As the professional audio industry matures and consolidates, the stakes for manufacturers keep getting bigger. At the same time, the power that manufacturers can leverage is escalating.

But that's just part of the story. Large retailers, distributors and contractors increasingly control distribution of pro audio products. Just where do system consultants/designers fit into this picture?

If you have the ultimate responsibility for the sound quality of a client's work, the question is how to insure that quality without drawing interfer-

ence from larger organizations that want to make the sale and get the credit. In the end, it's still likely going to be your reputation on the line, so some assertiveness is vital to prevent your project from being highjacked.

### GET IT IN WRITING

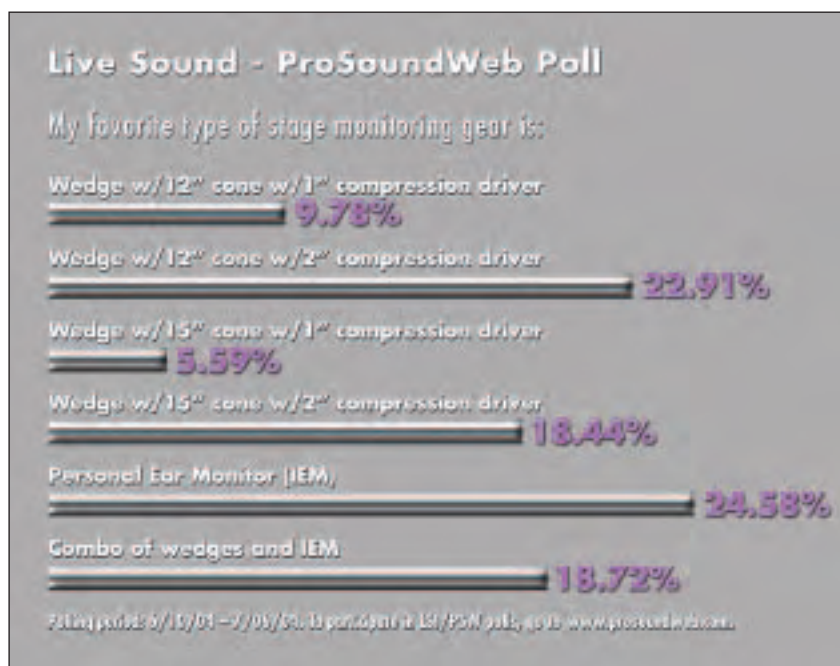
Communication with the client is critical in helping support equipment selections. You need to document the reasons behind your equipment choices as well, if the goal of repelling outside influences is to be attained.

It's not enough to believe a certain piece of equipment is "right," there should be objective data to support your decision. Performance simulations like EASE are good; measurement data even better.

Another tool to establish the criteria for equipment decisions is peer review, a process where other experienced system professionals review your design and provide a third-party, objective evaluation. At the same time, this same review process can be applied to the viability of suggested equipment substitutions and design changes.

Note that while a peer review can be a useful "jury" to provide insight and backing, it usually doesn't come free. So be sure that the parties who want to foist their will on your design are ultimately held accountable for the added cost.

Things can really get wild when a consultant is faced with this dilemma on a high-profile, prominent project, due to the legal responsibilities they can face if a system fails to meet the minimum performance specifications.



Designing world-class sound systems is hard enough without getting your hands tied by someone pushing an unwanted design alteration or swapping out components.

It's always politics on a grand scale and can sometimes reach a level of "theater of the absurd." But remember, when all is said and done, the client demands and expects quality. Any savings on a system will be worthless if it exhibits poor performance (and/or does not aesthetically fit into a room).

### THE UPSIDE

There can, however, be a positive side to all of this. Understand that on some rare occasions, system performance can be improved through an endorsement deal with a manufacturer. If this type of arrangement can be made – where the job is still done right while the client saves some serious cash – then don't fight it.

After all, manufacturers don't really want to screw up the job and suffer bad publicity. The bottom line is simply that all savings will evaporate if the system fails to provide a professional solution.

The worst-case scenario is having to replace all or part of a system, a big-bucks proposition. Further, who will be held financially responsible is anyone's guess. Even if this responsibility doesn't come crashing down on you, the job could still be lost as a result of the mess.

This type of situation confronts many systems professionals in their careers (and often more than once). The key is to factor in all variables and decide what is best, ultimately, for the customer.

If a manufacturer is offering a poor solution and won't back down, you must stick to your guns. It can be a pain and an aggravation, but the responsibility for protecting quality for the customer – as well as your own reputation – lies with you. ■

*Michael MacDonald has been involved in the professional audio industry for more than 20 years. Beginning as a freelance mixer/engineer in the '70s, he transitioned to working for manufacturers in the mid-'80s and has been employed by, developed products for, and consulted with major companies such as Yamaha and JBL Professional. Michael can be reached at [mchlmacdonald@aol.com](mailto:mchlmacdonald@aol.com).*

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Source: Butterfly System White Paper by Guido Nowak

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