

Out With The Old?

The decision to repair – or replace – older gear

By Bruce Main

Another touring season is winding down. The gear has been hustled in and out of the trucks, up and down the ramps and suffered through the mud and dust and rain, and well, frankly, some of it's looking a little tired.

At least the super glue held that knob on the compressor through the summer and there were enough working snake channels left for the last big festival. But now it's time to take inventory and decide what has some life left in it and what needs to be

upgraded before the next season.

Some off-season maintenance and evaluations are a given. We always do impedance tests and sweep all the drivers in all of the loudspeakers to make sure that there are no mysterious buzzes, rattles or silences.

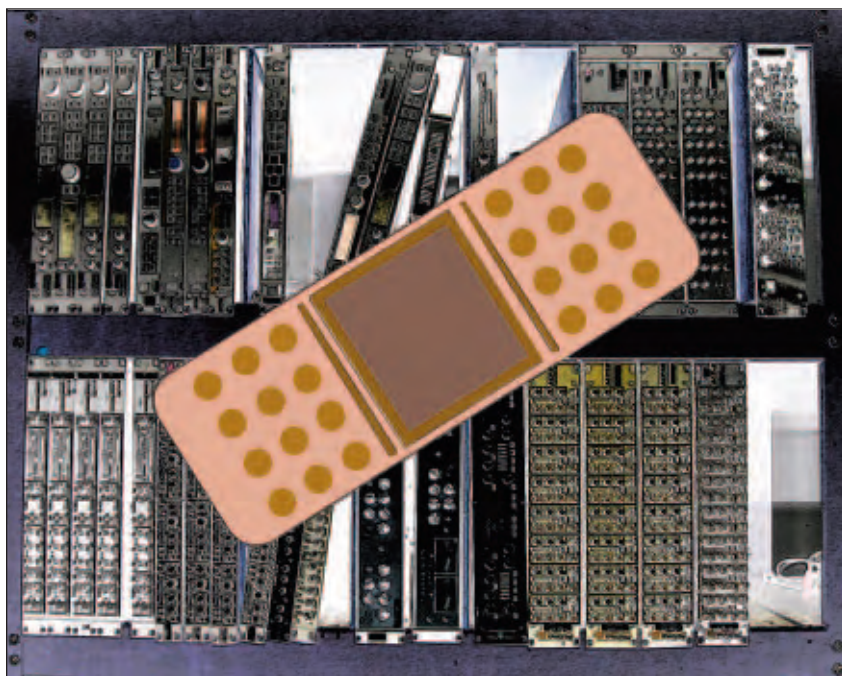
Every inch of cabling gets inspected and repaired. The consoles get their pots, switches and faders cleaned. Microphones get their wind-screens cleaned and their frequency response and output levels checked. Wood gets painted and cases get casters and handles as needed.

It all begs the question: How do you make the decision to replace instead of repair? When is it time to invest in new gear? For some companies the answer is only when you absolutely must.

We all get attached to our favorite toys; we know how to tweak them for optimum performance and how they behave in different applications. They get to be like an old pair of jeans, a little worn but oh so comfortable.

But these days if you operate your sound company like a hobby, that's just what it will become. Thus the need for a business strategy for equipment investment and amortization.

Do you know how long it will take to break even on that new console? Do you factor the price of maintenance and eventual replacement into your show costs? Have you developed a mechanism for selling off old gear and replacing it with new?



If not, you might be slowly working your way out of business.

SPREAD IT OUT

Rider acceptance is one factor that contributes to the shelf life of a piece of equipment. It's worthwhile to produce a spreadsheet with two sections - one for gear you own and one for equipment that shows up on riders but is not part of your inventory. If a piece you own shows up on just 20 percent of riders while a competing piece shows up on 60 percent, maybe it's time to make a change.

This spreadsheet can also help determine when gear is becoming obsolete. It takes a little administrative work, but the information gleaned is quite valuable. Also, keep track of gear that must be rented elsewhere to fulfill riders or service your customers. It may not take too many rentals to equal the purchase price outright.

Sometimes a compelling advance in technology makes upgrading an obvious decision. For example, when the new generation of lightweight power amplifiers came on the scene, the advantages of amp racks that weighed 100 pounds instead of 300 pounds caused many companies to change.

Ditto for good sounding, functional digital signal processing, while the new wave of digital consoles is starting to have significant impact on purchasing decisions. And, of course, there's the line array. (Duck and cover!)

For smaller enterprises, teamwork is important. Working with another company in your area that uses the same loudspeaker cabinets, amp racks and cabling pin-outs can help provide leverage in being able to do larger shows.

Cross-renting also keeps gear working that might otherwise be sitting in the warehouse. And it doesn't hurt to have an emergency source for spares available. Some manufacturers have user groups to help connect sound companies, but when it comes to cabling compatibility, a one-on-one relationship is necessary. You may also be able to negotiate better pricing by coordinating purchases.

Another spreadsheet worth developing is a warranty chart. Keep track of items based on serial number and date of purchase. This can help in two ways:

1) Items that require more frequent service may be a candidate for replacement by a different brand.

2) Knowing warranty status makes it easier to determine what to replace. If a piece is moving out of warranty coverage, then it might be time to replace it with a new unit covered by the manufacturer.

The best reason for buying new gear from a business point of view - is to make a jump up the food chain.

More and better equipment can enable you to do bigger, more lucrative shows. You can then attract and afford better, more experienced crew members who will in turn bring their contacts and relationships with them, continuing the upward cycle.

The most valuable commodity in our business is talented, well-connected people, and those folks generally will not work with shoddy, worn-out systems. They don't have to!

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Reality Check

LIKELY CANDIDATES

What to do with the old stuff if you've decided to replace it? The old show biz adage applies: "Be nice to the people you meet on the way up."

Keep a current database of all club owners, theater groups, churches, independent engineers and ex-employees you meet along the way. They may be candidates to buy some of the gear that you've outgrown. It pays to have a person in your organi-

zation who wears the sales hat at least part time to maintain contact and remind these people that you are a source for used gear.

Further, a classifieds section on your company web site can attract sales inquiries, and some industry web sites like *ProSoundWeb* have classified sections as well. When all else fails there's always E-bay!

If the old equipment doesn't have to be sold outright to finance the pur-

chase of replacement gear, the time-honored tradition of moving older gear down to "B" status provides an alternative to offer promoters of budget conscious events.

A fixed rental situation in a club might also be an option. Saving the older stuff from the wear and tear of going in and out of the truck every day can prolong it's life considerably, while providing a low-maintenance revenue stream.

We work in a technology-driven business. Given the lofty price tags for our tools, none of us has the lux-

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ury of running a company by the seat of our pants.

Planning, tracking, documenting and maximizing the return on investment are the only ways to stay competitive and profitable. We've all seen competitors who bought a shiny new pile of gear and then through poor planning, low-ball fees, bad maintenance and sloppy business practices ended up a few years later with a pile of junk they couldn't rent – and no way to replace it.

Don't let this happen to you. ■

Bruce Main has been a systems engineer and FOH mixer on and off for 27 years. He has also built, owned and operated recording studios and designed and installed sound systems. He can be reached at bmain@vectorcorp.com.

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