

Ethical Proof

A look behind the "informational" curtain

By Jack Alexander

Some of my fellow geezers out there might remember being dragged to large dime stores by female parentals (no mature male would be caught dead in such a place).

Aside from the too-sweet cola beverage offered as a bribe ("O.K. – I'll stop crying"), the only attraction was the pitch guy at the podium/riser in the front of the store. Imagine a riser,

maybe three feet high, with the kind of hotel podium associated with political or CEO speeches.

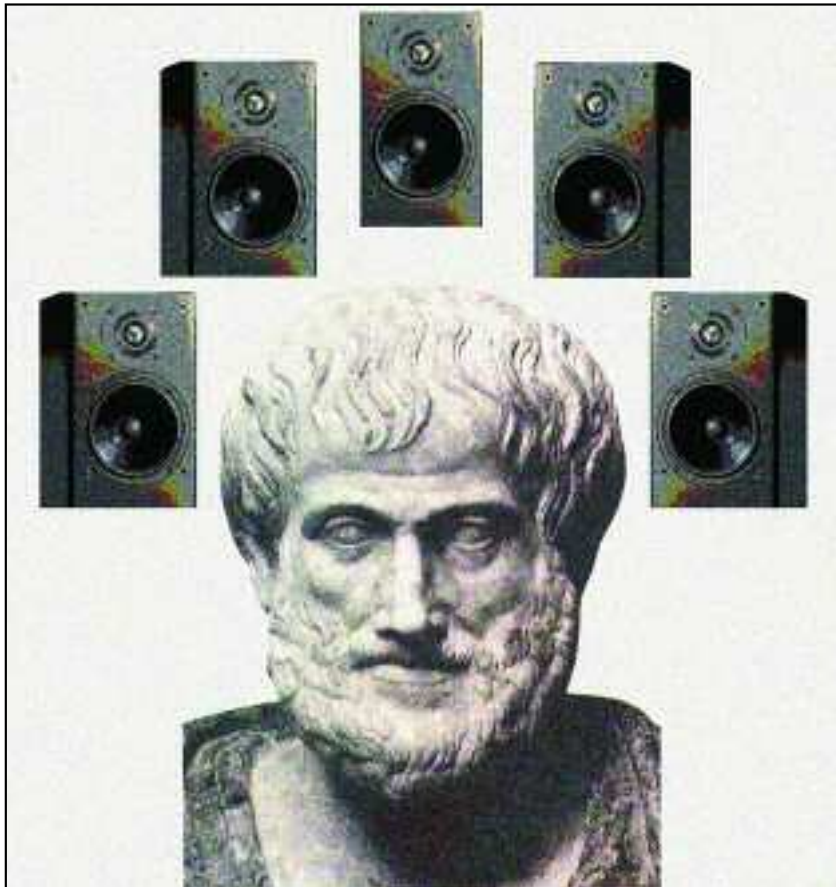
A big dude would get up there (always in a white shirt with no jacket), authoritative but not overly formal, and would proceed to mesmerize the rubes with his booming voice and suave assurance. These presentations would last 20 minutes or so, followed by a different pitchman flogging some other junk.

The audience would listen politely, and as the momentum rose, heads would bob up and down in assent, and you could almost go deaf from the catches snapping on those 1950s purses as the good matrons extracted their dollars and pushed toward the flacks who had suddenly appeared with cases of the nostrum in question.

They would gather in small clusters as they waited to exchange their greasy bills for the proffered mixture, and eyeballs would rotate as they sought assurance from one another that this purchase was indeed the answer to so many of their problems.

These days the "carnies" have been replaced by irritating coupon dispensers with flashing red lights and various other digital intrusions, but the game is the same: sell.

It all comes out of Aristotle. Check out his *Rhetoric*; there's a part about the speaker (in this case the speaker is a human trying to convince other humans about something – not a hulking output transducer), and the various appeals available to him/her in the pursuit of the listener's attention and assent. The most powerful proof



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available is “ethical proof,” composed of “character, sagacity, and goodwill.” Which means, when pitching anything, one must first prove that to be a truthful speaker, and more importantly, one who shares the same concept of “truth” as the audience.

These rhetorical tools remain the cornerstone of sales and marketing, even in the digital age. Add a little B.F. Skinner and other psychologists, and you can sell ice to Eskimos.

The background noise has increased over the centuries, making it much harder to get the message heard. As a result, we've seen the development of stealth methodologies, where the use of the word “sell” is the supreme no-no. Now we have “solutions” instead of products, “exchange of information” instead of hard-sell sales pitches, and my favorite, “sponsorship.”

This has gone a bit beyond hiding subwoofers behind curtains at loudspeaker demos or mono-ing 3-kW/channel amps into 400-watt stage monitors during shoot-outs. And it's far more sophisticated than sticking a picture of an Olympic athlete on a cereal box.

WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY?

In the pro audio business, the current lighting rod for much of this is what is referred to (incorrectly) as surround sound – multi-channel is more to the point, as all surround sound (except for some silly consumer one-box solutions) is multi-channel, but all multi-channel is not necessarily surround.

And it's a wonderful opportunity to flog kit, something new, mysterious, technological, sexy – an open playing field for the game. You need more loudspeakers, amps, stands, cables, various digital processing “solutions,” software, digital mixers... The list goes on. And you need “experts” to tell you how you to use this piece of pie.

Recently I was subjected to an “informational” presentation on “surround sound” that hit all these points and more. Various makers of hardware and software had thrown together some product, taken out on the road with a gentleman I dubbed “Mr. Geek,” who spent as much time justifying

his (modest) resume as making the pitch.

Some of the stuff he brought was O.K., and some was strictly from MI. I was amused by the condition of the individual loudspeakers used to demonstrate “surround at its “best.” They were a little road-burned, and pretty much all sounded different. As for the program content and ultimate sound quality, let's be charitable and say that it could have used a little work.

But what really offended me was the underlying message. It played on the fears of the audience: fear of being left behind, of being unemployable, of being uncool. The pitchman set himself as an arbiter of all things technical, theoretically making his (not so stealthy) endorsement of the proffered hardware and software logically and dripping with “ethical proof.”

So if he's a technical guru, and he brings these nice things to your facility, and he shares with you the real ways to be part of the “surround sound revolution,” then it would seem that the least you could do is buy the stuff and do it his way. And it's such an emotionally comfortable solution, with everything tied up in a neat package, there's no need to think or do research.

I first did a major multi-channel event in 1982 – quad system, yanked out of submasters on a large-format desk. Each output had a 1/3 graphic and a DDL.

We played around with the delays until there was image focus at FOH, which was equidistant from the four stacks. Channel assignment and panning was used to “walk” the various images from the stage into the different areas of the quad soundfield. As it was a big event, with a three-day in and a one-week run, we had a lot of opportunity to futz with the settings.

It worked, and it wasn't that hard, and was done without software or “solutions.” We did it with the same stuff that was sitting in every professional sound company's warehouse, and we did it using common sense and maybe a little good taste.

Yes, we were lucky, with 10 days to sort out a basic hearing-based methodology for live multi-channel. But it was nothing any of you couldn't do in your warehouse or parking

lot, or at the next outdoor festival for that matter.

I was ranting about this to an ex-student, who is now part of the engineering team at a facility that sports the latest “take” on multi-channel live. I'm going to withhold any discussions of the sound quality at that venue at this time, though I intend to review it some time next year after they have a chance to get things sorted a bit.

ULTIMATE POTENTIAL

As the young man went on about the ultimate potential for the system, as well as what it could already do, I hammered him with the notion that fewer and better loudspeakers and no “environmental software” solutions would produce a far better outcome. He replied that my idea would work, as long as the engineers were the real deal, but the system was designed to enable the participation of somewhat lesser engineering talent.

Exactly. From the capitalist point of view, fully realized engineers are an empty purse. The big boys pursue the fast food model, where it's all about the machinery, the humans can add no value and are therefore interchangeable and cheap.

Real live-sound operators cannot be reached with emotional/fear based appeals. They just pick up the phone and/or scope the Internet and/or go hear some shows to find out what is really going on, and buy accordingly.

As I'm in the business of getting what we will call “real” engineers ready for the “real” world, I get vexed when the sales types try to hit them before they're fully armed with the knowledge and experience that allow them to brush off guys like our friend Mr. Geek.

Which is my point. There is more and more sales and marketing in the guise of “sponsorship” and “information exchange,” and I figured it was time to provide a few tools for deleting these airborne viruses from your collective reality.

Note that I am NOT saying that all events fit the “marketing in the guise of information exchange” category. However, when attending any sort of “informational presentation,” start by concentrating on the generalities and

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any anecdotal information that seems to deviate from the script, and you might pick up a few things.

A night or two of surfing the Internet can provide a more balanced view, with instant access to all the web sites of all the manufacturers involved with an event. This will allow you to compare the attributes of the various products in a non-pressured environment, which will ultimately help lead to measured, non-emotional decisions.

Pretty much look at any endorsements skeptically. Note that factors other than sound quality can (and sadly does) influence the decision of an act or venue to endorse something or other. Even the makers of the "real stuff" must descend to endorsement, which makes it necessary that potential users do their homework on the Web, at shows, and with other engineers, and separate fact from noise.

Some of the smarter product vendors will hire people who fit Aristotle's ethical proof model, and pay them to appear at seminars on their behalf. But be suspicious of any organized marketing event, regardless of your respect for some of the participants. Better to go hear them do a show on your own.

BASED ON INFORMATION

Speaking of which... Going to concerts was once the best way to verify truth in these matters, as it was assumed that the act and sound company had a ton of money and couldn't be seduced. Any regional guy on the make knew what these guys were using and based his purchases (when funds allowed) on this information.

But now you can't necessarily trust the product decisions made by high-profile entities, as any high-visibility situation will instantly attract attention from those who deal in product placement and endorsement. All that free stuff is mighty attractive, especially in this "era of accountants," and if it isn't the best thing, who's to know, right?

We see this in academia as well. Some institutions actively solicit free equipment, and some find the freebies forced on them by college administrations, who, hungry for bucks, will trade academic freedom for a big

donation to the endowment. I suppose we (the Columbia College audio department) represent the other extreme, where we don't endorse anything – we just use the stuff we like and beat up the vendors a bit for a decent deal.

Yup, I did spend a long time doing sales and marketing, usually for smaller firms without the means of playing these games. But yes, every company has a right to do all this, just as we have a right to be conscious of the situation.

THE SAGACITY PART

Getting back to our friend uncle Aristotle, it's time to have a little fun on the ethical proof front, specifically the sagacity part. Next time out, I'll present a detailed methodology for live multi-channel production/mixing/system engineering that will work with whatever you have laying

around the shop, as long as you have enough of it.

You'll just have to listen critically to four to seven zones instead of two – like doing a set of monitor mixes driven into a front of house environment. That's right, most of you have been doing multi-channel mixing for years – onstage.

And I'll drop a little hint: all you have to do is move the energy around the house the same way, with much of your effort spent tweaking the timing of the zones to create the illusion of an integrated whole.

This is something our friend Mr. Geek and his like would not understand, as they tend not to be monitor engineers, if you catch my drift. ■

But what does Jack really think? Professor Alexander instructs on topics allied to performance audio at Columbia College in Chicago. Reach him at jalexander@colum.edu.

