

MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS FOR CUSTOM
ELECTRONICS DESIGN & INSTALLATION

residential systems

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A Company Finds its Niche

Shapiro and Rooney
Focus on Simplicity,
Elegance and Fun

Searching
For an
IR Standard

Studying the
Anatomy of a Merger

MANAGEMENT PROFILE

by peter
hoagland

Photos: Jackson Hill

*Keeping
Technology
Simple is
Maryland
Firm's Key
To Success*

*All Around Technology's
CEO, Tim Rooney (left)
and president, Rob
Shapiro, in front of their
Bethesda storefront, know
that technology and what
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*—Tim Rooney,
CEO, All Around
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It's logical to assume from the company's name, that All Around Technology is a widely diversified systems integrator, a firm that tackles anything and everything, never saying no to a new market or technology development. Yet that is far from reality for the Bethesda, Maryland, firm. For good reason.

In this fast-paced age of systems integration, many leading-edge systems integrators increasingly find themselves in a quandary: how to provide their clients with a total systems solution while maintaining specific areas of expertise. Technologies allow for more integrated and related products that consumers find exciting, easier to use and desirable, yet the technologies and products created from them continue to become more complex for designers, installers and technicians. And if not considered carefully, they will be too complex for end-users as well!

Seeking the right balance is one of the many challenges that Rob Shapiro and Tim Rooney regularly ponder at All Around Technology. As one of the leading custom installation companies in the country, Rooney and Shapiro know that technology and what it can do for their clients is important. Yet they never lose sight of what has made them successful: providing their clients with systems that are simple, elegant and fun.

All Around Technology actually began as Audio Center in 1959 in Bethesda, a wealthy suburb of Washington, DC. Its 41-year history makes it the oldest company in Maryland dedicated to residential audio/video entertainment, and among the oldest such companies in the country. Originally part of a commercial electronics based business, Audio Center was a pioneer in custom installation in the 1960s and '70s. The company soon realized there were

booming market opportunities in quality hi-fi components, later to become stereo. With a well-heeled clientele in the shadow of the nation's capitol, this is often described as a recession-proof local economy. For decades, Audio Center did little to no advertising and prospered on referrals and word of mouth.

However, strong competition from aggressive DC market A/V retailers in the '80s and early '90s stunted the company's growth, and a new direction was needed. In 1992, Audio Center was purchased from its parent company and through Shapiro's leadership and vision became more focused on high-end home theater and custom installation.

"We were doing fairly well with the retail store but it was becoming clear that custom installation was where the new specialty opportunities were, particularly in this market," Shapiro recalled. "We could have continued with retail sales and the showroom, however it was more important for us to concentrate all of our resources on the design and installation business. So in 1996 we closed the retail showroom and focused on high-end custom. It turned out to be a great decision."

At the same time Rooney, who went on to be a principal of All Around Technology and its CEO, served as installation manager at Audio Center. Together, he and Shapiro quickly built the company up to where it is today: a dedicated team of 18 employees in an impressive 8,000-square-foot facility. On this transition and rapid growth of the past four years Rooney commented, "The key was putting the selling of boxes behind us and focusing on system solutions and all that entails. There are more than enough challenges in systems integration without having to worry about a retail business too!"

All Around now combines design, engineering and integration capabilities with complete project management as well as extensive installation capabilities. The company handles about 25 projects annually. All of their projects are supported with an in-house service department to keep their demanding clients happy. On service and its importance to their business. "We take service and support very seriously because our clients expect the best," Shapiro noted. "Keeping them satisfied is what drives our success. Everything we do has long-term serviceability, along with the ability to upgrade, as top priorities."

Unlike some firms which don't set a minimum price for the jobs they will do, All Around focuses primarily on large, high-end projects. The company's philosophy and entire focus is on simplicity and customer satisfaction. "A key factor in our success is simplicity," Rooney explained. "The best equipment in the world will make no one happy if they can't operate it. That may sound obvious but how many times have you seen systems that their owners don't know how to operate? They won't be happy, and that is a real long-term problem for the company that sold it."

Rooney added that all of the systems they install use keypad and/or touchscreen control devices for easy and intuitive operation. "This simplicity of operation and the customer's willingness to go this route is the deciding factor in accepting a project—not the price," he said. "A sophisticated entertainment system should be simple enough for a house guest to operate."

Because their systems wind up in some of the finest houses in greater Washington DC, aesthetics are of prime importance for All Around. Shapiro, Rooney and their team go to painstaking lengths to ensure that their designs are clean and unobtrusive, as are the actual installations themselves. Wires and cabling are always properly bundled, labeled and routed. The back of equipment racks are given the same level of detail as the front. Attention is given to all areas including some that the client will never see.

Simplicity also extends to All Around's philosophy of what products and services they will and won't offer. Their primary specialties are state of the art home theater and distributed

audio and video, typically integrated with custom lighting and control systems.

Shapiro and Rooney feel that these areas, given their complexity and change, are the most they can and should concentrate on. Regarding their philosophy Shapiro explained, "Tim and I are of the firm opinion that no single company can do everything to the highest level of quality. Therefore, at All Around we concentrate our efforts around our strengths of audio, video, video distribution, lighting, control systems and project management."

Like most high-end custom installation projects, most of All Around's designs include, or typically interface with, products such as security, phone systems and computer network distribution. However, as Shapiro pointed out, his company's business plan in this area is somewhat unique. "The way we help seamlessly provide all these to a client is through partnering via strategic alliances in these other fields," he explained. "Some of these relationships can be difficult especially on large projects with overlapping deadlines and surprises. The key is in our strong project management capability to coordinate with other partners in a project."

Another one of the company's guiding principles is to achieve its goals through teamwork. According to Rooney, "the only way to get the quality levels that we are able to achieve in our production is by cultivating a company-wide culture of quality and learning. We understand that the people responsible for doing the work of the project are the ones most likely to recognize a better way of doing something. The knowledge and the skills and the cool tricks that are the successes of one job are transferred to other team members in in-house training seminars and project reviews so that our efficiency and impact improves dramatically with each new job."

Audio Center has indeed come a long way since 1959. But what hasn't changed with All Around Technology and their 21st century clients are the time-honored values of focusing on what you do best while keeping it simple.

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by peter hoagland

Putting Simplicity, Elegance and Fun Into Practice



tacular 18,000-square-foot estate. The house was designed and built on a scenic lakefront parcel, suitable for a post card or painting.

The project began in July 1998 with a referral from an interior designer. All Around does no advertising or solicitation, but like most successful high-end systems integrators their new business comes primarily from referrals from previous clients or a strategic partner. After a few months of qualification and preliminary design, the project went under contract in October 1998. Pre-wiring began in February of 1999 and the installation was largely completed one year later, though many areas continue to be upgraded and expanded.

One of the unique challenges presented with this project was not having an architect to interface with. "We almost always have an architect to work with," said Rob Shapiro, president of All Around Technology. "However in this case the builder was exceptionally skilled and competent so the homeowner didn't feel an architect was necessary. This was a real challenge and frankly concerned us at first. What made it work were our project



Northern Virginia and the area surrounding around Dulles Airport is often referred to as the Internet Capital of the World, being home to many leading Internet and telecommunications giants. Nestled in the beautiful suburb of Great Falls, just outside of Washington, DC, lies the estate of a highly successful technology executive and a happy client of All Around Technology. All Around Technology is an established residential systems integrator based in nearby Bethesda, Maryland, and owned by Rob Shapiro and Tim Rooney.

All Around's core philosophy is to take complex systems and products and offer them so they are simple, elegant and fun for their clients. Here these principles are showcased in a spec-



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The state-of-the-art home theater features a Rumco 9-inch CRT projector and a Faroudja 3000 processor and a complete Proceed/Revel Ultima surround system from Madrigal.

"We used a Proceed AWP surround processor and Proceed HP2 and AMP 5 power amplifiers," Shapiro said. "The HP2 powers the two Revel Satos and the AMP 5 powers the center speaker and the four surround speakers. The Proceed and Revel are not exactly a package they just work together nicely and are distributed as Madrigal's best surround system."

To enjoy the fabulous sights and sounds in plush comfort, there are nine motorized DaVinci Leather seats from Cinema Tech. For complete convenience and security, the entire house is controlled by a Panja Landmark control system, using 17 DMS Keypads and three

management skills. Our ability to direct other contractors and our professional partners is one of the things we do best. Without that, frankly this project would have been much more difficult and problematic."

Chief project manager Barry Hahman added that while the homeowner was skeptical of the project management budget and value at first, "by the end of the project, he and the contractor were using our scheduling and punchlist deliverables to direct the completion of the entire house," he said.

To illustrate just how complex the project was, All Around started off with more than five miles of wire in the pre-wire stage alone. The client being very technology-savvy, clearly understood the importance of "future-proofing" his home, which included a complete fiber optic pre-wire. All Around designed and managed the pre-wire for other systems as well, including HVAC, security, lighting control, telephone and computer networking.

The project included design and installation of 16 zones of audio including FM Radio, DSS Audio, Cassette Tape, a 5-disc CD Player and three zones of hard disc CD audio provided by Arrakis. Sixteen video outlets were used to distribute DSS, cable and off-air television throughout the house. Also included were 52 telephone, 20 high-speed data/fiber optic cable outlets and a complete lighting control system.

All Around Technology's work is showcased inside and outside a spectacular 18,000-square-foot estate just outside of Washington DC. The home's dedicated theater which includes nine motorized DaVinci Leather seats from Cinema Tech, features a Rumco 9-inch CRT projector and a Faroudja 3000 processor, a complete Proceed/Revel Ultima surround system from Madrigal, and Stewart 100x54-inch Studiolek 130 with electronic masking. For complete convenience and security, the entire house is controlled by a Panja Landmark control system, using 17 DMS Keypads and three 10-inch active color touchscreens. All Around hid the rear-surround speakers in a cabinet in front of 30 15x15-inch custom matched mahogany diffusers (bottom, center photo). The company also designed and managed the pre-wire for other systems as well, including HVAC, security, lighting control, telephone and computer networking.

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10-inch active color touchscreens.

Home theater systems are one of All Around's specialties and this particular one is one of the company's favorites. All Around's "normal" high-end home theater project would include an acoustics professional to perform room analysis and specify acoustical treatment that would be covered by stretch fabric. Shapiro recalls that "this is usually a project within a project and the client here was skeptical of this process. However, we were successful in applying the 80/20 rule here by consulting directly with Skip Warrenton of SDG acoustics. SDG was able to custom cover absorption material with fabric provided by the client's designer and recommend a large area of diffusion on the rear wall. When given the option of using painted styrene or solid hardwood, it was an easy choice. The client opted for 30 15x15-inch custom matched mahogany diffusers. These provide the rear sound diffusion we needed, but also presents a striking visual feature to one of the most important rooms. The client is thrilled and we are proud of how it turned out."

One of the biggest challenges for All Around was HVAC control. The HVAC integration

proposed the control of 28 zones, an all-time high for them. Tim Rooney, CEO of All Around Technology, grinned and said, "Twenty-eight zones of HVAC created an interesting dynamic situation. We had never attempted to control that many before. After much design time though, we saw no reason why it wouldn't work. This and the home theater were the two of the most desired features from the client's standpoint. So we knew we had to make it work and work well."

Rooney went on to add that "the HVAC contractor wanted nothing to do with a third-party control device in their system, but the client was adamant. Because of this unwillingness on the part of the HVAC contractor, the client arranged to purchase all the components directly. This complicated matters even more. In the end, it all turned out fine and we were able to work with the contractor. But in the future we would prefer to work only with HVAC contractors that understand control systems."

A far less technical, yet no less difficult, challenge came when the Cinema Tech chairs finally arrived. To accommodate the long lead times of any custom-built furniture it often must be ordered months in advance. All Around had held off shipping for four months and when they finally were shipped, they arrived in the middle of a major snowstorm! Even the best-laid plans can't account for Mother Nature. Because many secondary streets hadn't been plowed, the freight company refused to make any residential deliveries for that entire week. The only solution was for All Around's crew to meet the delivery company at a nearby 7-11 and make three separate trips in one of the company vans.

As part of their business philosophy, All Around uses the services of several professional partners on any given project. "Our feeling is that we are in a specialty business and our specialty is home theater, audio, video distribution and lighting control," Rooney explained. "Our strong project management component allowed us to out-source security, audio calibration, video projector calibration, a phone contractor, computer consultant and an acoustic consultant to provide services beyond our scope of work. This is a departure from the current trend of one company that does the entire low-voltage installation. However, we feel that the only way to actually get the best of all systems is to manage professionals doing what they do best. In our experience, we have found that a contractor that does everything, often does mediocre work."

All Around



Technology

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