

ADVERTISING FOR AV PROS

Although few system integrators advertise, paid media can help build your brand and lead to sales

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Many AV dealers, integrators and contractors admit they rarely use advertising activities to attract new business. Instead, they prefer to rely on their sales staff to uncover opportunities through established contacts, supplier leads and cold calling. Yet others argue that advertising is an essential part of their success.

Although "advertising" can mean a lot of things to different people, those who work in the field typically limit its definition to promotional activities paid to some medium, such as a newspaper or magazine, radio or TV, a web banner, a billboard or in the Yellow Pages.

One traditional use of advertising is brand building. Chip Roth, CEO of Indianapolis-based AV systems integrator ESCO Communications, says he has run a regular schedule in the Indianapolis Business Journal and other publications for the past two years with the goal of establishing the ESCO brand. "For 38 years we went under the name Electrical Systems Company, but we sold out to a public rollup in 2000, and then I bought it back in 2002," he says. "We're on our third name in three years, so we really needed to build some identity."

With this type of campaign, Roth says phone calls and leads aren't as important as name recognition. When an ESCO sales rep calls on a prospective customer, the rep is more likely to make progress if the prospect already knows who

ESCO is and has a favorable impression of the company.

Advertising may also be used to directly stimulate sales. Alejandra Santamaria, advertising manager at Fort Lauderdale, FL-based pro AV dealer International Audio Visual, says awareness isn't enough; she wants direct inquiries that her sales force can follow up on and close. Santamaria places regular product-oriented ads in AV trade, house of worship, and computer publications, as well as on AV, church, and home theater web portals and e-newsletters. She also advertises regularly with Google and Overture and says these ads bring a great deal of traffic to her company's website. "We're bombarding people, and the results are really significant," she says.

Howard Ellman, vice president of sales for Chicago-based Roscor Corporation, says the AV integration firm uses advertising for two distinct purposes. The company runs product-oriented ads for its Discount Video Warehouse subsidiary and also runs brand-building ads its AV systems integration business. Ellman says Roscor runs the discount ads nationally, while the integration ads run in regional business and vertical-market publications. "Our general goal is to communicate our capabilities and experiences," Ellman says. "We have lots of happy customers, but there are still people who aren't familiar with what those capabilities are."

Ellman, however, says one problem with any kind of advertising is that the results can be hard to

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by Don Kreski

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measure. "We try different ways of measuring them, but it's still difficult to attribute sales to advertising with any level of certainty."

Santamaria, on the other hand, says that by and large she is successful measuring the results of her program. "When our customers go to our website and click for a quote, I have a drop down menu where they can choose where they saw our ad," she says. International Audio Visual also has measuring devices on its website that track other important information, including the particular site and banner a visitor clicked through from. In addition, Santamaria polls her sales force to help determine which media are bringing in new customers. However, she says she questions the reliability of such reports. "The reps just don't want the added work," she says. "I ask the question and they'll say, 'oh I heard they came from Google,' but that's not really accurate."

Another problem is that advertising results strongly depend on how well you match your message to your reader. "People are as busy as ever, so you need to make sure you put something valuable in front of them," Ellman says.

Dennis Krebs, marketing manager for West Chester, PA-based systems integrator Advanced AV, says integrators have to be selective. "Know what your objective is and who your audience is before you design the ad," he says. "Some managers work backwards and put together a pretty ad without really understanding who their target audience is."

Still, the number one mistake AV advertisers make is failing to find vehicles that reach their target customers. For example, Krebs says Advanced AV ran some unsuccessful radio commercials in Philadelphia during Eagles football games. "As a result of that campaign, it was pretty much confirmed that radio was not the best approach," Krebs says. "And that's only because with radio, as with any mass medium, you're not really able to specifically target end users and decision makers for AV. You're just kind of getting your name out there and you really can't hone in on your target markets."

Santamaria says she's successful because she can match the AV trade publications to her dealer customers and match the house of worship magazines to her church customers. International Audio Visual also benefits from the national reach of the trade publications and the international reach of the Internet.

However, local AV integrators may have a much harder time finding publications that match their key targets. Instead, Cheryl Anderson, CEO of Milwaukee-based AV systems integrator Infocor Communications, says she puts her priorities on mail, trade shows and her website.



In my own experience as a marketing manager for two AV dealerships, I found that these publications are out there, but they can be difficult to find and are often very small. For example, I ran a number of ads in a newsletter published by the Sales Automation Association of Chicago (SAA). This (now defunct) newsletter went directly to managers who equipped their sales forces with laptop computers and CRM software such as ACT or Goldmine. The circulation was small and we didn't expect, or get, many calls. Nonetheless, when I spoke to a large projector-fleet customer one day and asked how he had found us, he said, "Oh, I was leafing through the SAA newsletter and I saw that you sold this particular projector. We had just bought a large number but were unhappy with the supplier."

The upshot was that the cheap little ad led directly to a 90-projector sale. While some of its success may have been luck or related to an eye-catching graphic, it was primarily being in a publication that catered directly to one of our key markets. Bottom line: advertising can be very effective for AV integrators if you put your first effort into finding the publications that reach your target market.

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