Installation Photography

Good photography is a sound investment.

Is it worth investing in good photography of your AV installations?

"Absolutely," says Gina Lauria, director of marketing for Crestron and former marketing manager at dealer/integrator HB Communications. "Once you get a good photo, it's worth its weight in gold. You'll use it for your website, brochures, portfolios to show potential customers, local advertising, tradeshows, and trade magazines."

Paul Baumeister, director of marketing at Baumeister Electronic Architects, a Chicago-based residential systems integrator, says

photography is the basis of his success placing stories in the trade and architectural press.

"I try to look at photography from an art director's perspective," he says. "If someone sent me an image that was dark, blurry, or poorly composed, I'd say, 'Beautiful installation—I can't do anything with it.'"

MAKING A GOOD INSTALLATION PHOTO
Great systems photographs usually share certain characteristics.

"To me, the biggest thing is the lighting,"

If a project seems attractive for magazine submission, award worthy, or could be of interest to vendors, hiring a photographer is a probably a good investment.

Extra cables, uneven chairs, or a pop can in the picture can distract the viewer and create an unprofessional image. When setting up a room for a photo shoot, survey the room to verify that it's in photo-shape.

Lauria says. "Sometimes, even a pretty average room can come to life with professional lighting."

Beyond that, the angle and the point of view are most important. "You want to create some kind of drama," Lauria adds. An unusual perspective or a wide-angle lens can make the difference. Then too, she says she feels that incorporating people into an installation shot, while difficult, separates your photos from others'.

I have found that my own clients sometimes have trouble understanding that the look of the room itself—the furniture, colors, layout, and built-in lighting—is often more important in a photo than the technology they've installed.

Baumeister suggests that what makes a great image depends on its audience.

"I think we've got to shoot things three ways," he explains. "There's the big technology shot with a screen, touchpanel, television, rack, and a projector on the upper right. The second shot takes a stealth standpoint. What does the room really look like if you're not trying to feature your equipment? The third removes the technology entirely. That might mean a reverse angle, physically removing a touchpanel, or making sure it isn't lit up. You might look at a shot like this and say,

'Wow, that's beautiful.' The first shot may be beautiful, as well, but it creates a different feeling."

The need for images like these begs the question: Do you have to hire a photographer, or can you shoot them yourself? Baumeister, who does both, says he believes that the choice comes down to whether it's a high-profile project.

A project may have a cool story attractive to magazines, it may have possibilities for award submissions, or it may be of interest to vendors. Such projects are usually worth an extra investment. When you want images only for your website and your brag book, inhouse photography may make more sense.

HIRING A PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER

Although she worked for a dealer for many years before joining Crestron, Lauria has never tried to take her own photos. "I always just figured I should leave graphic design to the designers and photography to the photographers," she says.

She argues that you'll nearly always want to bite the bullet and hire a profes-

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sional, but you may depend on vendors to share the cost through co-op funds. "If you tell your manufacturers, 'I'm going to be doing pictures of this auditorium, your product is going to be significantly shown, and I'll give you use of the images if you help pay your fair share,' then I can't think of an instance where they'll turn that down."

Penny Sitler, advertising manager at Draper, says she most often finds good photographers through referrals. I have found that manufacturers such as Draper and Crestron can often be your best referral source. Another source she uses is the Association of Independent Architectural Photographers (AIAP) and its directory at *aiap.photographer.org*. "Typically, the photographers we would look at seriously all have websites with samples of their

work," she explains. "See who does a good job of making a room look inviting."

Both Sitler and Lauria generally travel with the photographer they hire to help them decide on the shots they'll take and approve their work. It's possible to find someone who does not need such supervision, but that's not the norm.

Prices can vary greatly, but Lauria suggests budgeting—very roughly—$2,000 per shoot. For that investment, you'll get anywhere from three to possibly 10 or 12 photos—depending on how much lighting the photographer sets up. "Four or five beauty shots is a lot to expect on one photo shoot," Lauria says. Lauria and Sitler say it doesn't much matter whether the photographer shoots on film or digitally, but they want the images delivered digitally.

SHOOTING IMAGES YOURSELF

Despite the advantages of hiring professional photographers, Baumeister says he shoots many installations himself. He has a background in graphic arts, but he's also a self-taught photographer who says he feels others can do what he does.

Baumeister explains that he uses fairly simple equipment: a digital SLR, a wide-angle zoom, and a tripod. You'll need a camera with at least 6-megapixel to 10-megapixel resolution.

He shoots whenever possible with available light, but he'll often add a light or two with stands and umbrellas, which helps to even out a room's lighting levels and match them with whatever windows are in the shot. Recently, he's been experimenting with narrow spot lighting to add drama. He's also comfortable enough with Adobe Photoshop that he feels a shot doesn't have to be 100 percent perfect, which allows him to work faster on-site.

"It's just practice, basically," Baumeister says. "The professionals I work with are not trying to overdo things. They understand their limitations and work within them." He does the same.

Lauria adds, however, that it's easy for amateurs to overlook some basic items when shooting photos of their work.

"You need to take the empty soda cans off the tables," she says. Take away extra cables, straighten the chairs, and make sure they are all the same height."

Indeed, if you look carefully at the room, you'll start to see things that are amiss. Is that a coffee stain on that table? Are the draperies hanging evenly, and are they open or shut all the way?

Among the lessons I've learned over the years: An extra, ultra-wide lens can be useful in smaller rooms; knowing how to set a custom white balance is crucial; it's a big help to bracket your exposures (shoot a range of images darker and lighter than what you think is right); and it's important to download your photos to a laptop to make sure you have what you think you need before you leave the site.

Baumeister suggests that images visible on projection or plasma screens are a very important part of any systems' photo. You'll often see photos in trade magazines with washed-out, cyan-tinted screen im-

ages, but that's not how they really look in the rooms. To get them right, some photographers will shoot the images off the actual screen, while others add logos or stock images later.

If you shoot off the screen, realize that you'll need to take a separate exposure with a separate white balance and add it to your main shot later—your camera's daylight setting should be pretty close for most displays.

Beyond these basics, you have to give yourself enough time, Baumeister says.

"You've got to be prepared," he says. "The bottom line is, if you turn in a 640x480 image, that's not going to get you a full page in a magazine—no matter how good it looks on your PC."

If you already have an interest in photography, and you're willing to take these steps and learn as you go, then it's possible to take some very good systems photos. If not, then hiring is your best bet.

"It is an investment, but it's absolutely worth it," Lauria says. ■