



All About Trust

HOW FUNDAMENTAL CUSTOMER SERVICE EARNED BOSTON-AREA ESC LONG-TERM CLIENT LOYALTY

by Don Kreski

Jim Ares is quite surprised that other AV contractors aren't as successful as his firm.

"We don't do anything special," he said. "We reply to emails. We answer our phones on the weekend if a client calls. We show them that if they have a problem, they can communicate with us, and we'll take care of it immediately..."

Ares' approach seems simple to the point of cliché, but the trick, he says, is consistency. Great service is easy to talk about, but not so easy to provide. "My wife will ask, 'Do you have to take business calls again this weekend?' Well, yes, I do. This is what we do," he said.

Is it worth it? Ares can cite the example of a Boston-area home where he has installed well over a million dollars in audio and video systems since 2004. The funny thing is that Home Entertainment Expo, which Ares directs and co-founded, was not the first contractor to work in this house. The homeowner found Expo five years after the original installations and only because he was unhappy with the level of the equipment and support he had received so far.

The Westwood Project

Ares first got involved with this Westwood, MA, homeowner in January 2004. "It was a referral from a cabinetmaker," he recalled. The initial project was small: an upgrade from cable to satellite TV. But in talking about the change, the homeowner expressed unhappiness with his whole-house audio system, and Ares made a few suggestions.

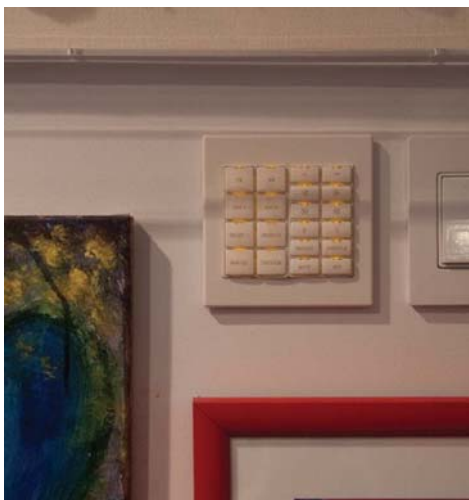
The immediate problem was that this was a set-it-and-leave-it system. If family members were out in the pool and wanted to change the music source or even the volume, they had to get up and walk back across the yard into the house.

Ares suggested that Expo rework the audio system, adding Crestron control and a waterproof wireless remote. "We told him if his kids played with it, even dropped it into the pool, that would be all right," he said. The client liked the idea and gave Expo the go-ahead to rebuild the entire audio system, adding control panels in various rooms and waterproof remotes for the pool and an indoor spa. "We ended up keeping the speakers and wiring, but replacing everything else," Ares noted. The homeowner was very pleased with the work, which Expo completed that May.



Top: After gaining his client's trust with his initial changes to a previous contractor's work, Home Entertainment Expo's Jim Ares (inset above) went to work on another series of upgrades, which included adding an audio and video system in the bar and a home automation system with audio, video, and HVAC control from touchpanels throughout the house. The big project that summer was the home theater. Above: The central equipment rack for the house

By summer, Ares was at work on another series of upgrades. Expo installed an audio and video system in the bar and a home automation system with audio, video, and HVAC control from touchpanels throughout the house. But the big project that summer was the home theater.



After completing the home's monumental home theater project, Home Entertainment Expo did a cool project for its client's kids: a game room with a large-screen TV, all the different consoles, 5.1 surround, and on-wall controls.

A World-Class Theater

"When the home was built in 1999, the builder included a shell for a theater, with a tiered cement floor, cement walls, and nothing in it whatsoever," Ares explained. "Five years later, the homeowner came to us and said, 'Here's a clean slate. What are we going to do here?'"

Ares suggested a high-end Runco projector, Crestron controls, Lexicon processors and amplifiers, Genelec loudspeakers, and CinemaTech seating. "He asked us to create a world-class theater. And as we did it, he was absorbing everything, adding to his knowledge of the technology and what he wanted for the rest of the house."

That fall, Expo added four more zones of audio, a telephone and intercom system, and security cameras and gate control. Images from the cameras viewable on the Crestron touchpanels, and family

members can talk to visitors at the gate from the touchpanels, as well. "Next, we did a cool project for the kids: a game room with a large-screen TV, all the different consoles and 5.1 surround. It was fun."

By the summer of 2005 the home was nice enough to earn Expo a place in *Boston Magazine's* "Best of Boston" issue in August. The relationship was getting stronger, but it was not at the level of complete trust that Ares enjoys today.

"That year we installed a Video Request, which was a DVD server that failed miserably and has since been discontinued," Ares explained. "What can I say? Everyone makes mistakes, and most people understand that. Our CEO, Dave Gormley, is very supportive, and I knew there was no way we were going to leave that system in there if it didn't work properly."

Expo pulled the system out even before they invoiced it. "We felt it wasn't going to work the way



A Crestron touchpanel shows the gate control screen with video from one of the home's outdoor cameras.

it was supposed to, so I called the homeowner and told him I wasn't happy. I think he appreciated my candor and the fact that I brought it to his attention before he had a chance to complain."

Since 2005, Expo has upgraded all of the home's TVs to flat panels, did two major upgrades to the home network, introduced streaming applications including VUDU, added two more zones of outdoor audio, and, this winter, upgraded the AV controls and video surveillance systems to work with the family's iPhones and iPads. Recently the homeowner purchased a condo in a high-rise in Rhode Island, and he has asked Ares for his suggestions for new audio, video, and automation systems to be installed there.

It's All About Trust

At this point it might be fair to ask, what happened to the original contractor? How did he manage to get locked out of over a million dollars worth of

work that he should have had sewn up?

According to Ares, he did what too many people in our industry normally do. He was a little bit slow to return calls; he was a little bit late in finishing projects, and he was a little put out when problems arose. "He hit his ceiling," Ares surmised. "The homeowner was frustrated with the response times and a failure to give him the attention he felt he deserved."

"If you want to keep your clients," Ares added, "it's pretty basic. It's reply to their emails, take their calls, take care of any problems immediately. If they're having a big event at the house, swing by and check the system. Shake the client's hand and ask, how's everything going?"

Ninety percent of the solution is doing what you say you're going to do by the date you said it would be done, Ares added. "If I set an expectation of how it's going to work, it works within that expectation plus some," he explained. "Beyond that, if I get an email at 10:30 on a Saturday night asking me to help him out, I'll immediately call and say, 'You push this button and then that button.' He just couldn't get that level of attention from the other company."

Ares said it took at least two years before he felt he had built the level of trust he wanted with this client. "Today I'm the only one who has carte blanche to his entire house. If he calls and says, 'I've got an issue in the master bedroom,' I can stop by unannounced, even if he's out of town, and the staff knows to let me into that bedroom and do what needs to be done."

"At that point, it's no longer a conversation



One of Home Entertainment Expo's first projects for his Westwood, MA, client was to rework a distributed audio system installed by another contractor, adding Crestron control panels in various rooms and waterproof remotes for the pool and an indoor spa.

of dollars and cents. It's about trust. It's the simplest, hardest thing you can ever do—earn that ultimate trust."

Don Kreski is president of Kreski Marketing Consultants in Mt. Prospect, IL.

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