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Goes the Distance

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A Matter Of Trust

The 'American Dream' still prospers at Florida Sound.

By Dawn Allcot

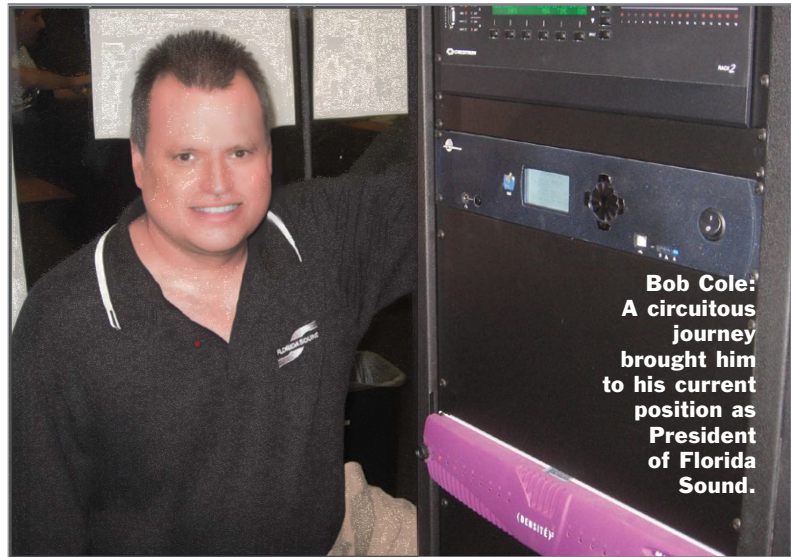
It's not every day someone offers you the opportunity to buy the company where you've worked for nearly 15 years...a company with a solid financial base, established accounts and a long-standing reputation in the region. But that's exactly what happened to Bob Cole, now President of Florida Sound Engineering Inc. (<http://floridasound.com>), in 1999. Cole, who owns the Jacksonville FL-based audiovisual systems integration firm with his wife, Diana, acknowledges that it was a circuitous journey that brought him to this position. In 1985, he was hired by then-owner Warren Coughlin as a technician and rose through the ranks of the installation crew.

In 1993, Cole became the first shop manager who was ever hired from within, overseeing the installation and service departments. Florida Sound, at this time, however, was not the company it is today. In addition to specializing in communications systems and audio systems design and integration, the company was one of the first Muzak franchises, installing speaker systems in restaurants, retail outlets and other venues, and providing music for those clients, as well.

In the early '90s, Coughlin's son Mark was running the company as president. Following his son's death in 1994, the senior Coughlin sold the audio integration firm and Muzak



A Sound & Communications contributor for about 15 years, Dawn Allcot is a full-time freelance writer covering church AV technology and marketing, green technology, personal finance, small business marketing, social media and commercial audiovisual integration. Follow her on Twitter (@DawnAllcot) or go to www.allcotmedia.com.



Bob Cole:
A circuitous journey brought him to his current position as President of Florida Sound.

franchise to a friend, another Muzak franchise owner, in 1996. The company changed hands yet again, to another Muzak franchise owner, before Centre Partners Management, a New York NY-based private equity firm purchased it, along with Muzak corporate. Finally, in 1999, Muzak was purchased from Centre Partners in a \$350 million deal by Audio Communications Network, part of ABRY Partners, a Boston-based private equity firm. Audio Communications Network was, at the time, the largest independent franchise of Muzak services in the US. [Note: In May 2011, Toronto, Canada-based Mood Media Corporation purchased Muzak Holdings LLC from Audio Communications Network.]

Cole reported that, when ABRY Partners took over, the corporate partners gave Cole and his wife the opportunity to buy the Florida Sound name and any pro sound installation

jobs, including stadiums and race tracks, that were still in progress, while the investment firm kept the franchise and the Muzak accounts. With the Florida Sound name came a solid reputation for quality and excellence, along with a list of existing clients that had come to trust Florida Sound over the years. Copy in sales brochures throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s often stated, "Please do not hesitate to write or telephone me, *personally*, if we can be of service," and was signed by Warren Coughlin.

The company's rich history dates back even further than Cole's tenure. Founded in 1950 by Warren Coughlin, the company was named Florida Wired Sound, and made its money installing telephone lines for Jacksonville area businesses. It was a logical progression, from there, to pipe music over the telephone lines and then distribute that sound through



In 2009, Florida Sound expanded into new headquarters with more office and warehouse space.

speakers supplied and installed by the company.

Of course, as technology has changed dramatically, today, Florida Sound's highly trained teams design and install audio and video systems in venues such as Jacksonville's Alltel Stadium and the University of Florida Stadium, communications and noise-masking systems in BellSouth Tower in Jacksonville, and sound, video and control systems in numerous churches and theaters across the Southeast US. Nevertheless, it might be said that the company has come full circle, going back to its roots as a small, family-owned business. Florida Sound employs nine full-time people, including Kenny Niblick, who was the Florida Sound senior technician when Cole bought the company.

"We've had a couple of offers to sell the company but, under the circumstances, we don't think it would be the right move," Cole said. Business ownership runs in his bloodlines. "My grandfather was a self-made businessman who started with nothing and became successful in the automobile repair business. I know he would not want me to give up the opportunity that was given to us in 1999, so we've stayed a private



The dining room at Flagler College in Flagler County, Florida, required sound reinforcement that would blend in with the room's design and architecture. Florida Sound built this rolling equipment cart for the dining room.

family business."

The company has prospered under Cole's direction, moving to new headquarters in the Avenues Business Center on the south side of Jacksonville in 2009, doubling the warehouse and office space.

While Cole got his entrepreneurial spirit from his grandfather, he inherited his sales savvy from his father, a successful salesperson for GM and Chevrolet back in the heyday of American automobile manufacturing and sales.

It was his father, Cole said, who taught him the four basics of making a sale, and the one component that must be present to close a deal: "Money, want, need and trust. If a prospect doesn't have the money, you can find a way through financing or they can figure out a way to get that money. If they don't want what you're selling or think they don't need it? That can change. You can work that out, show them why they do need it or get them to want it. But if they don't *trust* you, the sale is off. If you can establish a relationship of trust, though, the rest can be massaged to make the sale work."

This is especially true today, when many buyers are shopping on the internet for the lowest price, and looking at do-it-yourself AV solutions. With about 60% of Florida Sound's business coming from the house-of-worship segment—a market with traditionally small budgets and big dreams for audiovisual systems—competing with internet pricing is a challenge Cole knows all too well.

Again, competing against internet pricing is about establishing a relationship of trust and, often, Cole said, it's not until after the equipment is purchased that he has the opportunity to offer his expertise and help these customers. "We see some churches, especially for small-to-mid-size projects, trying to do things on their own, but they often wind up calling an integrator in the end."

In these situations, Cole said, "We try to make the engine run as best we can with what they have. We'll work to make it perform to specifi-



The bulk of Florida Sound’s projects consists of churches (such as this equipment room at Calvary Christian Center in Ormond Beach FL) and stadiums, but conference rooms and office complexes make up a percentage of Florida Sound’s clientele, including work for Brown Bank Equipment, and extensive AV and control systems in Florida’s Clay County Emergency Services Complex, a two-story building with more than 100 rooms and 11 zones of audio.

cations with the equipment they’ve already purchased because, after they’ve already spent the money, they’re not anxious to dig even deeper into the coffers.”

Although the Florida Sound teams are willing to work to make existing equipment fit within a project to stay within a budget, the company shies away from “value engineering,” both the phrase and philosophy. “Bill

Thrasher, an engineer out of Atlanta, once said to me, ‘Value engineering is neither. It does not offer value and it does not offer engineering,’” Cole explained.

He continued, with an analogy from the automobile industry: “An automobile is designed to have four tires, a steering wheel, an engine... specific components so it runs. If somebody decides to ‘value engi-

neer’ a car by removing a tire and taking out a few cylinders, he has done nothing to improve the car. At some point, you devalue the quality of the project, and the engineering is removed.”

Instead, Cole uses the phrases “meat-and-potatoes” or “equal alternatives” to deal with shrinking client budgets. “We’ll look for alternate pieces of equipment that offer more

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bang for the buck," he said. "Most projects don't need lots of bells and whistles. They require raw horsepower and performance. We'll look for alternative equipment, for less money, with the same specifications or better."

Cole echoed an all-too-familiar frustration of many other AV integrators when he said, "Customers can always find a lower price on the internet but, what they're missing is not just the warranty and service... it's the reputation of the integrator and the end result of what the system delivers. For instance, audio in a church is not just a wireless microphone, an amplifier and a cluster of speakers or a line array. It's not just pieces of equipment and cable runs. It's an entire system, designed and installed by talented, trained, experienced individuals. Taking that system design and installation approach is what has made us profitable and successful."

Employee training is another topic Cole feels passionate about. He lists certifications from InfoComm, Crestron, Smaart [Rational Acoustics], Q-Sys [QSC Audio] and many others among the accreditations and certifications Florida Sound and its employees have received. "Once you've already established trust with existing customers, the certifications don't matter as much," Cole said. "But accreditations benefit you when potential new clients are comparison shopping. They tell people that your employees have the training, and that you've taken the time and the expense to send your employees to seminars and classes because knowledge is important to you."

Beyond its benefit as a marketing tool, Cole said, "Why would you *not* want to train your employees? When you do so, they become more valuable to themselves and to the company."

With this philosophy, it's not surprising that Florida Sound is on the cutting edge of ITAV convergence, and recently became certified in the sale and installation of Q-Sys, QSC's integrated system platform, which

provides audio routing, processing, control and monitoring remotely over IP. Cole revealed that Florida Sound has several projects in the works that could benefit from the control system.

In terms of recently completed projects, Cole cited Calvary Christian Center on I-4 in Ormond Beach FL, which is rocking church visitors with a JBL Vertec system powered by Crown amps and a Digidesign HD64 console installed in April 2010.

Also in the works is a new

Florida Sound website, completely redesigned to reflect the company's commitment to professionalism and quality. But even as the company moves toward the future with a state-of-the-art website and integration projects employing the latest in IT/AV technology, it's still old-fashioned values that keep Florida Sound at the top of its game. "Honesty is still one of the best policies. Establish trust. We honor everything we do to make sure the end user is satisfied," Cole concluded. ■

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