



## HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR Integrated System Projects

by Russ Gager

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*Systems integrators offer tips from how to learn IT skills to managing customer expectations in order to pave the way to more effective projects.*



More and more security jobs are requiring systems integration skills, and the line between systems integrators and security dealers and installers is becoming fuzzier all the time.

What are some techniques and tactics that security dealers and systems integrators use when handling their increasingly integrated installations? Security professionals responded to *SDM's* questions with everything from installation and technical tips, to business and customer management techniques.

*Integrating video surveillance, access control, intrusion sensors and ID systems can be a complicated task. Dealers and integrators share their tips on planning a project and maintaining a client relationship.*

### PLAN FOR SOFTWARE UPGRADES

Tom Hagen, president of Pro-Tec Design Inc., Plymouth, Minn., suggests planning for the future of an integrated system.

"Think through and have a plan for ongoing support of the integration before you ever initiate the process," he advises. "Have an understanding of how future software upgrades will affect the integration. Most of the major manufacturers are coming out with one or two software releases every year. Sometimes the new software is incompatible with whatever was previously integrated."

Two systems from different companies may be successfully integrated, but if one of the companies comes out with a newer version of its software, then the integration may not work with the other company's software.

"Whose responsibility is it to make sure that new release is still integrated with the other company's software?" Hagen asks. "Your customer is probably not thinking about this; he's just assuming that if you put it in, you're going to make sure it all works."

One solution Hagen suggests is to use just one manufacturer's products for video surveillance, access control and other systems, whenever they meet the

customers' needs.

"That would be the smart way to go, because you can be sure the manufacturer will make sure his system works with his other systems," he asserts. "That would greatly reduce the risks that are associated with ongoing support."

## **GARNER INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SKILLS**

Another tip from Hagen is to train your employees well in the systems you install.

"It would be wise to have at least one and preferably more than one senior technician certified by the manufacturer to support the application software on each of the systems you're planning to integrate," he recommends.

"If you're not going to make that commitment, don't do the project, because you'd never be able to support it," he suggests. "Frankly, most suppliers would never undertake that kind of a project anyway, if you hadn't already made that commitment."

He also advises developing a training plan for technicians that moves them through Microsoft and network certifications.

Jim Henry, CEO of Henry Bros. Electronics Inc. (HBE), Saddlebrook, N.J., agrees that IT training, such as CCIE certification from Cisco Systems, is crucial.

"You've got to have network literacy. We have found it beneficial to have CCIEs on staff to demonstrate proficiency in that area, so you don't have the IT representatives of your customer up in arms when you start touching their network," Henry suggests. "It's extremely important to have that internal literacy."

A tip on how to obtain IT employees is to groom them from within. "We were lucky enough to have people with experience outside or in the security industry who had a real focus on these IT-centric roles," remarks Michael Lamarca, director of software applications and engineering for FirstService Security, Norristown, Pa.

"We've developed that through our training program," he points out. "It's a focus of our organization, because we really need to serve the enterprise-level client,



*Because of the variety of security systems in the industry, integrating them does not always reduce the number of graphical user interfaces (GUIs).*

and going forward, we try to recruit talent.”

Another tip Lamarca suggests is to have employees who can handle middleware programming, which interfaces between disparate security systems, and to be able to have custom programs written if necessary.

David Bitton, vice president, Supreme Security Systems, Union, N.J., agrees that training is crucial. “Learn, learn, learn,” he advises. “Try to do as much of the project and technologies with your own personnel. Get them certified, get them trained and get their hands on it, and try not to rely on a third party to provide any part of the technological implementation.

“Then I can own the whole system,” Bitton notes. “When something breaks, I don’t want to have to worry who else is responsible.

“If you can’t maintain [a client’s system], you’re never going to sell another system,” Bitton insists.

## **BENCH TEST AS A RULE**

Hagen emphasizes the importance of bench testing integrated systems before they are installed. “Set up a bench test system in your office or encourage your customer to provide a bench test system where all software upgrades can be tested prior to implementation on a live working system,” he advises.

“I’m of the belief that integrated software upgrades or any kind of software release should never just be implemented on a live system without some type of bench testing first,” Hagen maintains. “If you’re working with the IT department, I think many times they’d be surprised if you didn’t think that was important.”

## **CHOOSE SUPPLIERS CAREFULLY**

A security dealer or systems integrator’s success with systems is tied intimately to the ones with which he or she chooses to work.

“Choose the system manufacturers that you work with carefully,” Hagen recommends. “If they’re not committed to the process of supplying integrated systems, then maybe you shouldn’t be either, or else you need to find a supplier that is. Some suppliers really have developed the infrastructure to



*The integrated security management platform for Cox Communications’*

integrate their systems with other products out there, and they're willing to support that.

"If they're not, I think an independent dealer is swimming uphill to think he's going to be able to do it on his own," Hagen emphasizes. "You want to make sure the manufacturer is committed to that effort, and I think that also means you are willing to make a long-term commitment to that manufacturer, so that you'll both be there over the long haul to support your customer."

*Communications  
70 locations in  
Arizona is run by  
Benson Systems  
Inc., Gilbert, Ariz.  
All facilities are  
monitored,  
managed and  
maintained by  
Benson Systems'  
technicians.*

Finally, the bottom line is the customer. "Work with and listen to your customer to determine what his needs are," Hagen stresses. "Make sure the solution you offer actually solves the problem he has. There is too much bells-and-whistles technology out there and too many solutions trying to find a problem."

Lamarca of FirstService Security agrees that client expectations must be determined accurately.

"We ask questions and listen to the answers," Lamarca says simply. "The best way to ask the question is, 'What is the benefit you're looking to get from this?' Then, engineer the solution to meet that and the goals they're trying to accomplish.

"It sounds pretty fundamental, but it's shocking how often people take things for granted," he concedes. To do that effectively, having employees who can speak the same language as the customer's IT people is important.

## **STAY CUSTOMER-CENTRIC**

Bitton of Supreme Security stresses that determining customer expectations is critical. "Probably one of the most important tips you can give anyone is to make sure that you assess the full scope of what the system needs to do," he emphasizes.

"Make sure that is defined in the initial proposal and that is what gets signed off by the customer," he stresses. "Everything has a way of morphing during the course of a project into something else."

Bitton has had jobs in which a client's expectations mushroomed beyond the scope of the agreed-upon installation.

"Inevitably, what the customer wants at the end of a project is more than what they wanted at the beginning of the project," he laments. "It costs more, and your client may or may not be interested in paying that additional money."

Two distasteful alternatives in that case are doing the work at cost or losing the customer, Bitton concludes.

Shawn Benson, president/CEO of Benson Systems Inc., Gilbert, Ariz., emphasizes that systems cannot be designed from a fixed template. "First of all, you need to understand all [of your customer's] processes," Benson says. "How do they function? What are their hours and mode of operations? The biggest thing is if you need more than just one level of security."

Benson also suggests instituting an in-house training facility to help educate customers on how to operate their systems. "We offer end user training in our 4,500-square-foot training facility within our building," he says, adding that it saves his customers travel costs to many manufacturers' training sessions.

He also suggests letting larger clients use the training facility for their own security employee classes. "The more I offer to my big customers, the more they're in here, the better," he concludes.

## **STAFF MUST FOCUS ON DATABASE INTEGRATION**

The integrated systems division of Stanley Security Solutions Inc., Indianapolis, has come across many tips to solve integration challenges, reveals Jay Vaitkus, Stanley's global product and marketing manager.

"One of the things we do fairly well but it was a fairly painful route was the integration of various databases together," Vaitkus notes. The return on investment for a university, for example, to integrate its access, library and meal card systems is substantial, but so are the challenges, he says.

"It sounds easy and there is a significant ROI of doing it, but it is very complicated," he emphasizes. "Any change to one field in one of the programs will affect the others."

His company has an eight-member software solutions group that assists salespeople in quoting such projects because of the different types of software systems a customer can use, including proprietary ones the university may have developed itself.

“Good upfront planning is the key word if you’re doing any database integration, but the return on investment is significant to manage all your data at one point rather than multiple points,” Vaitkus stresses.

### **Sidebar: Integrators Identify New Business Opportunities**

An aspect of integration in which Henry Bros. Electronics Inc. (HBE), Saddlebrook, N.J., has been working is emergency preparedness planning, which now is required in New York City. A tip for additional business is developing these plans for building owners.

Michael Lamarca, director of software applications and engineering for FirstService Security, Norristown, Pa., also points to a large number of projects in automated failover systems, which provide backup or redundancy for systems, and in data recovery during disasters.

Stanley Security Solutions Inc., Indianapolis, has done work with asset tracking, in which, for example, the location of expensive diagnostic equipment that is moved around a hospital needs to be known. It may not have been stolen, but employees cannot remember where they last left it. An active ID tag on the equipment is used to track it through radio signals.

### **Sidebar: Get out of Town**

Small systems integrators should not hesitate to take on jobs that are remotely located from their regular territory, thinks Clifford Franklin, president of Sabre Integrated Security Systems, New York.

“We do a lot of work out of town, which is unusual for a small integrator,” Franklin relates. Among the locations where the company has clients are Washington, Baltimore, Virginia and even Alabama.

“A lot of smaller companies shy away from that, but with good management, there are markets out there that are in their realms,” Franklin insists.

Sabre receives many of these projects from out-of-state divisions of companies that are their customers in New York. “Most are where we’ve been requested by the contact in New York to go look at those jobs,” he points out.

Franklin’s tip for this type of work is to pay close attention to the details when doing a site visit. “Make sure you have everything for the job before you go

down there," he suggests. "To get that right, you have to be very stringent with your survey."

How a surveillance camera will attach to a wall, the types of door frames that will need electronic latching and access control equipment, and how a door is constructed are some of the details that must be studied closely.

"Sundry items basically are the ones that screw you up when you're doing an installation," Franklin concedes, such as fasteners, screws or conduit boxes. "If you get all that detail in your survey, you'll have no problem."

Having employees who enjoy traveling for a few days or weeks is important, too. "We try to get a package together before we send someone out of town where they have literally everything in hand, and off they go," Franklin explains. "Generally we don't get problems. If you're going away any distance, you want to know what your miscellaneous items are. You don't want to run to the hardware store."

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