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HOUSE RULES

How Custom Integrators are Learning to Work
More Effectively with Production Home Builders



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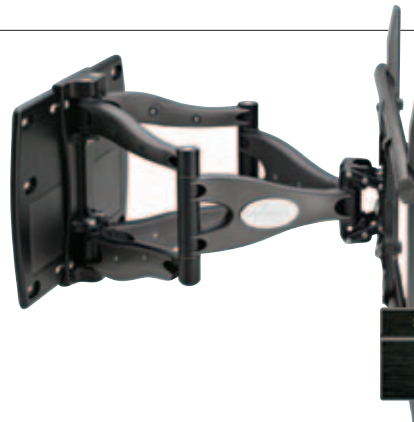
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SONANCE'S NEW DESIGN

INDUSTRY INNOVATOR RE-INVENTS THE IN-WALL SPEAKER

If there is one in-wall speaker company that truly could be called an innovator, it is Sonance of San Clemente, California. The company's co-founders, Scott Struthers and Geoff Spencer, not only designed the first in-wall speaker for the custom install market (1982), but their company also brought the first in-wall subwoofer to market, created the first in-wall home theater speaker with a pivoting tweeter, launched the first THX Ultra in-wall speaker system, and even designed the first in-wall music system for the Apple iPod, just to name a few. Most recently the Sonance team introduced what some consider the first real structural change to the in-wall speaker in 25 years. As the first in-wall speakers to offer flangeless designs to match new high-end lighting fixtures, the Architectural Series is gaining enthusiastic response not only from dealers, but also from discerning interior designers and architects. In addition to aesthetic improvements, the elimination of the 3/8-inch flange enables designers to fit an eight-inch driver into the space where a six-inch speaker used to fit. Struthers, along with his COO Shawn Sugarman, recently visited the New York City offices of RS. Sonance's co-founder and CEDIA Lifetime Achievement Award winner shared his industry insight and discussed the concept behind his new in-ceiling speaker designs.



"Traditional in-wall speakers have all looked the same for a long time...but I really believe we're finally taking it to the next level"

—SCOTT STRUTHERS
Sonance

design is unique.

With the introduction of our new Architectural Series, I just completed a tour of Florida to visit our dealers. It's so fun to walk in and hear them say, "Wow this is really a big deal. It's so closely tracking what's happening in the home and what's happening in lighting." I don't know if I should say this, but unfortunately traditional in-wall speakers have all looked the same for a long time. But I really believe we're finally taking it to the next level.

Talk about the trends in lighting fixture designs and how they are reflected in your new speaker designs.

There are three different types of Architectural Speakers right now: totally invisible, nearly invisible, and a design statement. Designers love not seeing anything, but what we're also finding are a lot of light fixtures that are flangeless and flush-mount designs, and lights are getting smaller. They're getting so they don't have that brass ring around it anymore. Designers just want a totally flush surface and essentially a hole in the ceiling with a light coming out of it. So the new speakers we have designed have no flange around the outside. The average person may not think that's a big deal, but the designers just love it. I've now been around these speakers for a year and it's now hard for me to look at a traditional in-wall speaker, just for the fact that it looks dated now.

Looking at the industry as a whole, what do you see as the compelling trends right now?

The biggest thing is design and lifestyle. I think design is so huge. To be honest with you with in-wall speakers, which is our specialty, this has been an area that has been overlooked, even though the whole reason why the in-wall speakers exists today is because designers didn't want the big black cabinet speaker in a French provincial living room.

With that in mind, I understand that you consider Sonance a design company first and audio company second.

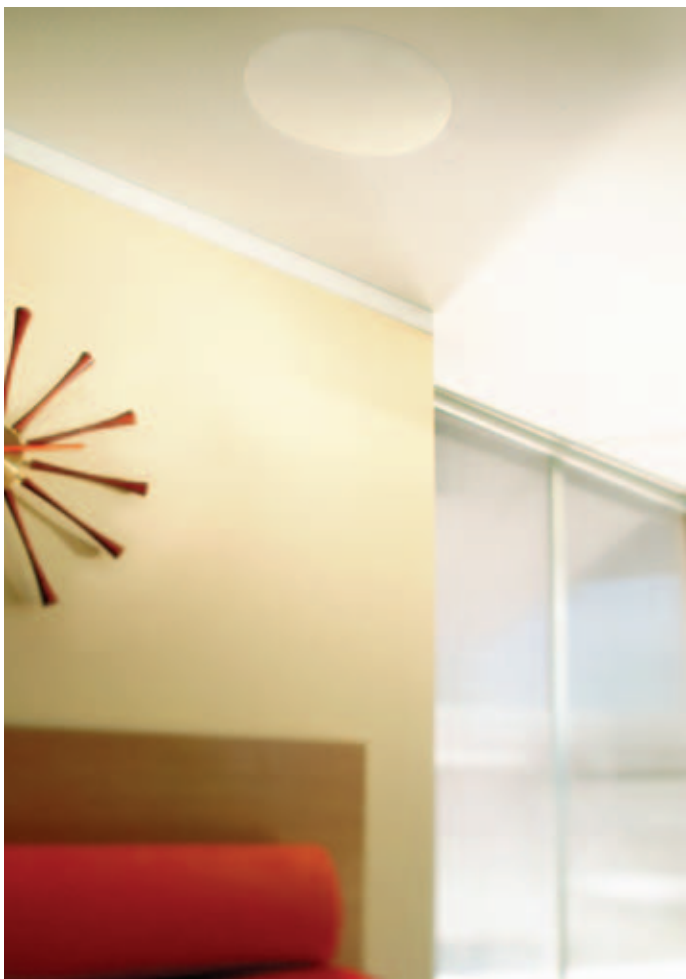
Well, I don't think that saying we're a design company first is quite the right way to put it. I think we look for the balance between design and audio. I really think the whole reason we exist is to create the best design, but we're also known for having the best sound out there.

Obviously you don't want to dismiss the technology side of what you do, but you do put a mandate on making sure the

It seems that most manufacturers are trying to broaden their reach to gain a much larger market, whereas your new products seem to be retrenched in the more traditional, but narrow, high-end. Do you see Sonance being able to grow with this strategy or are you simply concerned with holding onto what you've got?

Well holding onto the high-end is definitely a priority, but I think that with design becoming more and more of our industry, we are now specifically focusing on relationships with interior designers and architects, just like the CEDIA EL Conference. And because of that, I think the awareness for our industry is going up. Though we live in the high end I think you're seeing in-wall speakers and audio-video systems now common in track homes, and they will start to slowly inch their way down.

Do you think your dealers, as business people, are able to grow and adapt to this changing market?



Designed to be heard, not seen, Sonance's new flangeless in-ceiling design blends right in.

There's been a major progression in their development. Years ago, depending on how far back you want to go, you had hobbyists and the stereo store guys who really wanted to get into custom install. Now, and this was obvious on my tour of Florida last week, the guys running these businesses have the sophisticated business thought and business system. They're now more mature. They want a more balanced life, and they understand that having a good financial plan as well as a good systems plan, all make their life better. So it's a lot more professional business than it was before.

What do you think your dealers' biggest challenges are?

Probably the biggest challenge is getting quality people. I think that people and relationships are at the core of our business, especially as our companies get bigger and bigger. It depends on the goal of the dealer; some get big and downsize just because they find

that their life is better that way. Some of the most successful dealers out there are not into the absolute most bleeding-edge technology. They won't touch something unless it's been out for six months or a year. They don't want to go through that beta learning curve situation. But again that comes with experience, and that experience hopefully has to transcend from that top guy to the middle management guy, so that they don't repeat the same problems as five years ago.

Your Architectural Series is a pretty big product change. Are the dealers adapting well to that?

The dealers get it and many have said, "If I only had this last week or last month..." For high-end customers who are all about design, that is the driving factor. When it comes to having options to make something flush or flangeless—you know, modern—there's no choice. And they're the same people who are willing to pay two or three times more for a light switch or two or three times more for a

toilet. You name a part of their house, if it's the right design, they'll buy it.

I saw the demo at CES on how your dealers are supposed to finish the drywall edge of the flangeless speaker. Even though it was pretty intuitive, it seemed like a slightly new skill set for installers. Describe the transition for installers.

It surprises them a little bit because they're not used to it, but they accept it really quickly because of the fact that it's really just a piece of drywall that we sell. The whole reason it exists is that dry wall guys don't always cut the best holes around the brackets, so you need to build a flange on it. Our philosophy was that we do the hole at the factory with the bracket built into the hole, and now we hand them a piece of drywall. Immediately drywallers know how to deal with drywall. That's what their business is.

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