

## Are You Ready to Go Whole Hog?

Should the A/V staging company add lighting to their offerings?

In the go-go '90s, production budgets were much larger, and producers could afford the luxury of bringing in their favorite East Coast staging company to a West Coast show. As we face tighter budgets, many production companies are seeking local vendors to save on the cost of shipping and crew travel.

Using new, untried local vendors, however, adds an additional level of complexity, and increases the chances that things could go wrong. Because of this, the appeal of turnkey technical vendors is growing. One company, one goal, better communication on-site, which results in, theoretically, the perfect event.

While a group of disparate professional vendors can work together, the complex communication required is harder to coordinate, and conflicts easily arise. When questions arise regarding electrical power, for example, skirmishes break out regarding who gets the tie-in backstage and who has to run 200 feet of feeder to the basement.



With a turnkey vendor, on the other hand, each problem is everyone's problem. If the camera image on the screen doesn't look good, there is only one company to blame. In the multi-vendor scenario, it's easy to point a finger at another vendor. "It's not the camera, the lighting stinks," or "the lighting looks great, the projector isn't set right." Often the producer or the event planner has to act as a referee instead of focusing on the client.

Okay, so now you ask, "I want to add more to the services that I can offer my clients. How hard can it be?" Having been there, I can say, "it's no-brainer." Let's look at the example of an A/V company expanding into lighting.

You may already have a good relationship with a lighting company. You can try getting together with them and offering a package. It seems like a logical decision — there is no capital investment, and you can potentially bring each other new clients. But, in the end, you are still two different companies.

A DIFFERENT  
KIND OF PERSON  
GRAVITATES  
TOWARD  
RUNNING A  
FOLSOM  
MULTI-SCREEN  
SWITCH PACK  
THAN ONE WHO  
WANTS TO SIT  
BEHIND A  
WHOLE HOG  
CONSOLE AND  
PROGRAM  
MOVING LIGHTS.

You may share the common goal of growing business, but different corporate cultures and management styles may surface as problems later on. When something goes wrong, who takes the blame? More to the point, who takes the financial hit? Sometimes things happen technically that can't be analyzed in the short time before the system is packed up and sent back to the respective warehouses. You might think that you could address these issues professionally and work out resolutions between the two companies, but even legal marriages can fail. Sometimes only the presence of a contract that anticipated the potential problem can resolve the issue.

The next option: "Smith is looking to retire, I can ask him if he'll sell." There are many reasons for a healthy lighting company to be for sale. If you can manage the capital, why not buy one? You not only get the gear, but the talent and

client base, too. This is a stronger step beyond partnering, but you pay a premium for a "going concern." And there are the integration issues. Have you ever spent time with a friend's family and noticed how differently they do things than your own? They function as well as yours does, maybe even better, but the dynamic is different. Corporate management works the same way. If you can't blend the two companies together skillfully, you run the risk of alienating your talent and losing clients. Since that is what you paid the premium for, you wind up diminishing a big portion of your investment. You don't have to look hard to find a story about a failed merger these days.

"I can hire freelance experts and rent the gear," you might decide. No investment in equipment. Labor that is only on the payroll when billable to a show. Who could pass this up? Slow down. Without an inventory, you have no safety net. Sure you could rent extra equipment as insurance, but since you are renting, it is coming right out of your profit. I recall several years ago having a client that had hired us for a full production spread over several venues. He came by the office for a pre-con meeting, and at that time our lighting department was in its infancy. He seemed content that we had plenty of video, projection, and audio, but he specifically commented on the small quantity of lighting equipment that we had. That single point became the toughest part of the sell. He, like many other clients, felt that if I had to re-rent gear, it would cost him more than if he hired a lighting company directly, and he was right.

You might say: "I am going to buy the gear, and hire the talent to run it." In

*continued on page 64*

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## Ready to Go Whole Hog

*continued from page 60*

many equipment-based companies, the management structure is comprised of people who have moved up through the years. Just because you hired a great lighting director, that doesn't mean that your sales staff is going to know how to price and sell your new services. Most A/V gear has a

completely different rental pricing structure than lighting. Your operations staff is going to have to learn how to manage a new world of equipment. After several years of working with an A/V company, even our receptionist knew what a Sony DSC-1024 was and what it did. However, after a few weeks into the lighting business, with the lighting staff out on shows, I couldn't get anyone in the shop to pull four Source Four PARs to send to a site. Nobody knew what they were, and when I finally described them, the idea of stage-pin cable lens types caused a total meltdown!

You will also find a cultural difference in the personnel between A/V and lighting companies. Not to stereotype, but a different personality gravitates toward running a Folsom multi-screen switch pack than those who want to sit behind a Whole Hog console and program fifty moving lights.

While there is no perfect way to enter another realm of production, it can be done. Any of the methods mentioned can work with the right thought and research, but understand it will take time and it might be painful for a while, as you work your way through the learning curve. Being able to offer a turnkey production is a powerful sales tool and can help you achieve higher levels of success. For CPR, adding lighting to our services definitely was the right thing to do, and we have been steadily growing that division for several years. For years, lighting was something we could provide along with our core services, but the true mark of success was being hired for lighting-only events. ■