

# Installer *to the*



# STARS

A referral-driven network of high-profile, celebrity clients generates \$7 million-plus revenues for Audio Video Crafts.

BY TOM LeBLANC,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE HULBERT

**The opportunity to hang out** with a reigning Super Bowl MVP in his own home is rare. Still, Paul Austi didn't feel good about his recent visit to quarterback Eli Manning's Hoboken, N.J. condo.

The problem wasn't team alliance. As a New York Giants fan, Austi, the owner of Long Island City-based Audio Video Crafts (AVC), roots for his quarterback client. The problem was that the visit seemed to conflict with the philosophy he crafted for his company.

AVC's niche is celebrity clients. "Being discreet is the key," Austi says. There are lines that AVC is careful not to cross with famous clients. Knowing where those lines are has been critical to AVC's success.

Asking a client to allow six people into his home for a photo shoot and interview is crossing the line, according to Austi. "I wouldn't have asked Eli to do this in a million years," he says.

He didn't. Manning and his wife agreed to make their newly remodeled 3,000-square foot condo the subject of an *Electronic House* article (EH is *CE Pro's* sister magazine). AVC had nothing to do with it. Since the company had everything to do with the Manning's installation, Austi had to be there — however conflicted he felt.

"We never publish our work. We don't take photos of work. We respect privacy. We never give references without authorization," Austi says.

If he seems obsessive about this, it's because he is. AVC's business is deeply rooted in this unique client base. "We don't advertise, publish or even solicit work," Austi says. "Our business is stimulated solely through referrals."

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Paul Austi (left) doesn't pose for many photos with his celebrity clients. His company, Audio Video Crafts, treads carefully with customers, like New York Giants quarterback and Super Bowl MVP Eli Manning, in order to nurture its network of high-profile referral-based clients. In this case, Manning was happy to help out, posing for photos at his Hoboken, N.J. condo with Manhattan views.

## QUICK STATS

**Company:** Audio Video Crafts Inc.

**Location:** Long Island City, N.Y.

**Principals:** Paul Austi, president/owner; Tiziano Iannitelli, vice president of operations

**Years in Business:** 22

**Revenue:** \$7,131,791 (2007)

**Commercial/Residential Split:** 5%/95%

**No. of Employees:** 22

**Top Five Brands:** Crestron, Lutron, Sony, Rotel and Bowers & Wilkins

**Specialty:** Ultra-high-end residential, integrating systems catering to elite, high-profile clients

**FYI:** "To be successful in the ultra high-end residential business, you must be very lucky ... The harder you work, the luckier you get."



**"My dad [former Saints quarterback Archie Manning] is as clueless as they get when it comes to technology. It took me one minute to explain it to him."**

—Eli Manning, joking about his dad and talking about his Audio Video Crafts-installed Crestron control system

There can't be a misstep because business is driven completely by word of mouth. Therefore, AVC must avoid giving its celebrity clients anything negative to discuss.

Incidentally, Austi prefers to call them "elite, high-profile clients," but many of them are, in fact, celebrities. AVC's client list reads like an *US Weekly* table of contents. Besides Manning, there's Jerry Seinfeld, Joan Rivers, Woody Allen, Bette Midler, Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith, Laurence Fishburn and Steve Wynn, just to name a few.

Like most integrators that work within a niche, AVC stumbled upon it rather than strived for it. Looking to establish a base of clients early on, Austi went after architects and designers. "We just started working with people like that," he says, and "word of mouth took care of the rest."

### Handling the Handlers

Dealing with these high-profile clients is a delicate dance. Austi, along with his staff of 22, knows the right steps. Predictably, it comes down to superior cus-

tomers service. Still, it's not that simple.

AVC's clients often come with built-in challenges. They may be very guarded about their personal life and wary of contractors being inside their home. They are sometimes suspicious of being exploited. They are often protective of priceless possessions. "We have worked in homes with Picassos on the wall," Austi says.

The most challenging facet, however, is that it's difficult to get actual face-time with many high-profile clients. Austi and his team often have to dig through layers of "handlers" to extract clients' system needs. This is not a good thing, as any integrator knows, since only the person who will actually use the system can truly represent how he wants it to look and feel.

"A lot of times, we have to work with a rep," Austi says. "It means we have to spend more time on a project. You end up revisiting things multiple times because you're not getting things firsthand."

AVC spent three years working on an ambitious project for an extremely famous (and busy) comedian. "It would



have taken a year and a half if he had gone to the meetings,” Austi says.

On the flip side, Manning spent time speaking with Austi and vice president of operations Tiziano Iannitelli. Manning knew he wanted a sophisticated automation system with easy-to-use control of multiroom audio and motorized shades for his New York City skyline view. He didn’t know a lot about control system options. “I was naïve about how control systems work and how simple — or complicated — it would be,” Manning says.

So, Austi and Tiziano took him to a condo in the Time Warner Center with a Crestron system similar to what AVC proposed for Manning. He was sold.

Ease of use was Manning’s biggest concern since he and his wife, Abby, wanted guests to be able to easily control the system. Among those guests is his 59-year-old father, former New Orleans Saints quarterback Archie Manning. “My dad is as clueless as they get when it comes to technology,” Manning laughs. “It took me one minute to explain it to him.”

In the end, the Mannings are happy

enough with the system to allow it to be profiled in *Electronic House*.

The face time with Manning was the critical factor, Austi says.

It’s the other celebrity projects, the ones where AVC struggles to grasp the needs of the clients, that are risky. Austi says he has learned to say “no,” since a job like that isn’t likely to generate referrals anyway. His biggest mistakes, he says, are jobs that he has taken even though they “didn’t seem right.”

Sometimes it’s because he doesn’t feel good about how the architect is handling the project. Other times it’s because of the feeling Austi gets from the client. “If it’s clear that they’re not going to be available, I walk away. It’s not for me.”

Sometimes after walking away, Austi says the jobs eventually come back to him and he takes it under AVC’s terms. “I’m not going to design something with somebody else’s input. It becomes my fault [when they don’t get the desired result], and I don’t usually get any new work from them.”

Many celebrities, Austi is quick to point out, aren’t like that. Howard



Eli Manning and his wife Abby didn’t have lofty goals for their 3,000-square-foot condo’s electronics. Easy control of a multiroom audio system was among the simple requests. AVC provides a two-way spread spectrum wireless touchscreen Crestron controller.

The spectacular view of the New York City skyline is at least as important to the Mannings as TV and audio. With QED motorized coupled shades, they can enjoy the view, lower a level of shades to kill the glare and lower another level to black out all light. “It’s very convenient,” Manning says.



Manning and wife Abby couldn't be happier with their Crestron control system. Waking up early to head to Giants Stadium most days, Manning likes being able to easily control all the home's systems. "I can control the music in the shower, control the shades. At night when I go to bed I don't have to worry about leaving the lights on. I have an 'all on/all off' button right by the door."



Stern, for instance, frequently makes himself available to speak with Austi about his system.

Harrison Ford, meanwhile, is AVC's most hands-on celebrity client. Austi laughs as he tells a story about getting a surprise call from Ford. The actor wanted to swing by AVC's office because he wanted to check out the speakers we picked out for his system, Austi says. "The women in my office went crazy!"

### Star Treatment

Not all celebrity clients are as laid back as Ford or Manning. Just like clock management is essential to Manning's job, it's critical in Austi's line of work, too. "Time is of the essence," he says. If AVC is supposed to be somewhere at a certain time or wrap up a project by a particular deadline, it had better happen. Otherwise, Austi might have an angry celebrity on his hands.

**"As I was working on it, people were showing up with black ties. I got it working, but I was dripping with sweat I was so nervous."**

—Paul Austi, Audio Video Crafts, on troubleshooting a system before a high-profile client's Academy Awards party

A celebrity client's time is certainly not more important than other clients' time, but they might *think* it is. AVC has a lot on the line with its deadlines. A reputation for being late could lead to the drying up of the celebrity pipeline. So Austi places a major emphasis on scheduling and promptness.

"We don't give time ranges. We say '1:00 p.m.' exactly, not between '1 p.m. and 2 p.m.,' and in Manhattan it's very difficult," he says. "Keeping a job on schedule is really something we strive for." (See sidebar below.)

The other time-related issue is availability. "Clients must always feel that they can reach somebody 24/7," Austi says. That includes him, Iannitelli and the project managers.

Austi freely gives clients his home and cell phone number. It's not uncommon for his ultra-famous customers to return home late at night, experience a problem with their system and call Austi. In some cases, he hops in the car and heads over the bridge into Manhattan in the middle of the night. When he arrives at the luxury apartments he sometimes finds that there is no issue. Sometimes the system has been turned off manually, for instance. Austi, therefore, has become a master at not letting clients feel incompetent in these cases.

There are times, of course, that these urgent trips to Manhattan are for legitimate issues. Austi recalls that one client, a prominent financial figure, was having trouble with his system prior to hosting an Academy Awards party. "He called me at 8 p.m., and he lives a half hour away from me," he recalls. "As I was working on it, people were showing up with black ties. I got it working, but I was dripping with sweat I was so nervous. When [the client] refers me, he tells that story."

It's not just the dramatic stuff that AVC does that generates referrals. Austi, who has been working on high-end homes for 22 years, says he mastered the minutiae of customer service. "Even when we work on \$30 million renovations, we are often told that we were the best contractors on the project," he says.

### The Final 10%

It's obvious, given AVC's purely-referral-based client stream, that most clients are happy with their system installa-

## Manhattan Is 'Our Turf'

With his Brooklyn accent, it sounds kind of intimidating when Paul Austi, owner of Long Island City, N.Y.-based Audio Video Crafts (AVC), claims Manhattan as "our turf." What he means, however, is that it's not easy to be an integrator in New York City, but his team knows how to do it. "We know all the loopholes," he says.

Many of AVC's stable of high-profile clients live in Manhattan. Anybody who has ever worked there, tried to park there or even driven there understands the challenges. Nobody knows them better than Austi who has served clients there for 22 years. He lists just a few:

**TRAFFIC** — Based just outside Manhattan in Long Island City, AVC has easy access to the city. "We have seven different ways to get in and my office is located a quarter of a mile from every entrance in Manhattan," Austi says.

**PARKING** — Commercial vehicles can't be parked in most of Manhattan's garages, and on-street parking isn't exactly abundant. So, AVC's eight trucks rack up about 30 parking tickets per month. This is where Austi's experience pays off. He estimates that about 28 of 30 per month are beatable. Fighting the traffic department is time-consuming, but he says it's worth the effort.

**SERVICE ENTRANCE** — Trades generally can't go through the main entrances in New York City apartment buildings. Often the service entrance includes stairs, according to Austi. This isn't a good thing, especially when AVC installers are carrying heavy equipment. Austi knows which buildings involve stairs and can, therefore, plan extra time or men accordingly.

**FREIGHT ELEVATORS** — Rarely will AVC be the only trade working at a given time in a luxury building. This often means waiting while other workers hog the elevator, jeopardizing AVC's project schedule. This problem is amplified by the fact that many buildings only allow work to be done during certain hours or even during certain times of the year. Luckily, Austi knows many of the attendants in the city's buildings and can negotiate work-arounds.



**Paul Austi, owner of Long Island City, N.Y.-based Audio Video Crafts**

## | CEProfiles

Manning spends a lot of time in his study. It's where he often reviews game footage. He keeps his wireless controller nearby, so he can lower the shades or select music. He knew he wanted a certain level of control but Tiziano Iannitelli (left) and Paul Austi (right) introduced him to Crestron.

tions. What lifts AVC above the fray, however, are two simple things, according to Austi. "Our guys are neat and respectful."

It sounds simple, but it's not that easy, Austi says. "Working in a \$50 million home is an art form." He refers to working alongside clients' invaluable possessions, such as the Picassos. "We work next to things most people never get to see in a lifetime. You have to be careful. Don't touch anything. We treat the home like it should be treated."

AVC's installers' shoes never touch a client's floors, always wearing surgical booties. They always use drop cloths. "We work like we're in an operating room," Austi says. "The place is usually cleaner after we leave than before we arrive."

Often AVC is working with other trades. In those cases, Austi makes sure AVC installers walk around and mark any pre-existing scratches or issues of any kind. AVC also enforces a simple dress code: collared shirt and khakis.

Another essential customer service tool comes toward the end of the installation. "The last 10 percent of the project is the most important because it's what the client sees. The wiring, the speakers ... we never leave until we're satisfied."

That means working out any kinks in the system before the client discovers them. "You always have kinks, but we try to work that all out before the client touches it," Austi says.

There is a contrast between AVC employees and other trades working on a given project that Austi detects. He consciously plays off of it. "We try to outshine everybody and, in most



SCOTT CLARKE/ESPIN

cases, they make it easy for us.”

It wasn't always easy. There were mistakes along the way as AVC developed its celebrity niche. “In the early days, I learned not to bring up numbers at a meeting,” Austi recalls. “I told [a famous client] that a feature of a project wasn't cost-effective and he really put me in my place. It's not about price for many of these people. It's my instinct to try to be cost-effective with people's money, but that's really not my job. They want the best product and often aren't concerned with price.”

There is a part of Austi that wishes he could submit some of those priceless projects to award programs. He can't, of course, because his need to protect clients' privacy trumps his desire to win awards. So, Austi and AVC choose to let others have the spotlight. It's something that they're accustomed to doing.

“Still, I think we could win,” Austi laughs. **CE Pro**

## A Winning Record on the Road

It's no surprise that a lot of the high-profile clients that Audio Video CraftS (AVC) serves in New York City have additional properties around the continent. The company developed a unique system for providing its standard of service on the road, according to owner and president Paul Austi.

All design and engineering for long-distance jobs is done at AVC's Long Island City, N.Y. office. Assuming the project is a new-construction or a complete remodel, AVC enlists contractors working on the remote project to “do most of the grunt work,” Austi says, including pulling wires. “All terminations are still done by us.”

AVC, therefore, sends a crew to the site and Austi says his men stay there as long as it takes to make the installation “bulletproof.” In order to minimize travel and installation time, the design of remote projects is extremely important, he adds.

Providing post-installation service for long-distance projects is another challenge. In some cases, AVC finds a local CEDIA member to roll trucks if necessary. “Of course, we have to make it worth their while.”

Austi sees these relationships with local CEDIA members as a good way to stimulate the integration industry. He also suspects it “could work both ways.” If one of those companies finds work in the New York City area they may call upon AVC for similar service, perhaps providing a recurring revenue stream.

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