

Perfect 10: Shaping an Industry

CE Pro salutes the 10 most influential leaders in the custom installation industry

By Julie Jacobson

10/04 - A decade ago we rented a 14-foot x 14-foot room, bought some used furniture, sprung for a fax machine, and hung up a shingle that read "EH Publishing."

That was 1994, when this thing called custom installation was just taking off. A lot has happened since then. For starters, fax machines are almost obsolete. Other than that, some 20,000 companies have emerged to service the electronic house.

This business of custom installation—the business that feeds virtually every reader of CE Pro—may seem like an obscure profession to the general public. But to those who have had the privilege of crawling through attic spaces, debugging automation software, terminating cables, fending off trunk-slammer, and ultimately wallowing in the gratitude of happy homeowners who can set their "vacation" mode at the press of a button, this is a tremendously satisfying business.

We have a lot of people to thank for that. In celebration of our 10 years in business, we have assembled a list of folks to whom we should be most grateful. These are the leaders who have paved the way for custom installers to succeed. Selecting the Top 10 wasn't easy. We deferred to dozens of industry pundits—dealers, manufacturers, association executives, editors, and others—to help us hone the list to the select few that are recognized here.

The criteria? The CE Pro Leaders had to have made a sustained contribution to the custom installation industry over the past 10 years. Pioneers who jumpstarted this industry but faded out of the trade—while we appreciate their contributions—were not considered. Furthermore, the Leaders had to have been consistently successful during the decade. While we recognize the value of risk-taking and the knowledge that comes from failure, in the end we included only those who have demonstrated 10 years of relative success.

As a reminder, CE Pro's Top 10 Leaders is a list of people. Many companies have played a pivotal role in the evolution of the custom installation business, but we chose to recognize the individuals who have turned the custom electronics profession into a fun, profitable endeavor through their leadership, innovation and passion.

These leaders aren't necessarily the first, the best or the biggest. But they are some of the most enduring influences in the custom installation industry.

Joel Silver

Founder and president

Imaging Science Foundation

www.imagingscience.com

Tool-maker for the Video Trade We don't mean to belittle TV manufacturers, but even the best displays can look pretty lousy fresh out of the box. If there's ever a way custom installers can earn their keep, it's to take a \$10,000 television and make it perform like a \$10,000 television.

Thanks to Joel Silver, installers have the tools to do just that.

Silver is the president and founder of the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF), the company that sets the standards for video quality. Founded in 1994, ISF has created video calibration procedures that improve the performance of commercial and residential video displays. The company's mix of physical tools, classroom training and consulting is responsible for much of the good video we see in homes today.

But it's not so much the great things he's done for video that makes Silver a Top 10 Leader. It's the opportunity he has created for custom installers to thrive in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

"ISF certification has been a great thing for credibility," says Mark Ormiston, principal of Definitive Audio, a Seattle-based integrator with roughly 15 certified technicians. "But it goes beyond that. The whole process, the education, gets our technicians to understand video across all brands. It ensures that we give our customers a consistent, high-performing display regardless of which technician installs it."

More than 3,000 A/V professionals distinguish themselves by their ISF certification. And myriad manufacturers boast ISF logos on components blessed by Silver himself.

Silver never set out to become a video chieftain. With his college degree in philosophy, he figured he would teach. But years of work as a field engineer, a stint in the publishing business, and a disappointing big-screen TV of his own got him interested in video.

"I bought one of those six-foot curved things, with the big projector sitting in a coffee table," he recalls. "I bought it for about \$1,500 and had to pay it off in installments."

For all the investment, he says, "The picture was terrible, and I was embarrassed to show my friends. ... That's it, I got into this business because I was embarrassed by my television."

So Silver took some things he had seen in the commercial video arena, and began to apply them to the home market. Soon afterwards, he started helping dealer friends who wanted better pictures. And ISF was born.

Silver continues to train dealers (and enthusiasts and manufacturers and anyone else seeking video nirvana) on how to achieve stellar pictures from their video projectors.

But he is also focusing nowadays on other video sources, namely PCs and the Internet. With Microsoft, he created the Calibration Wizard that comes with every Media Center Edition computer. The user-friendly wizard takes consumers through a few easy tasks to optimize the TV images generated by the computers video card.

Most recently, Silver set up the Imaging Science Research Labs at Microsoft's Redmond, Wash. headquarters to develop specifications for ISF-worthy video cards sold with MCE computers.

"We've got high-definition capture cards, and killer application for Media Center Edition is HD recording," Silver says. "Our goal is to create a competitive environment between the best of the PC-based HD images and the best of the TV industry's HD offerings."

Why he's a Top 10 Leader: Joel Silver's infectious enthusiasm for high-quality video has inspired A/V integrators worldwide to provide a high level of technical service for their customers. His training and other calibration tools have given custom installers a way to distinguish themselves from the box-pushers. Most recently, he has worked with Microsoft to help enhance video quality generated from PC-based devices, paving the way for conscientious A/V dealers to take advantage of new digital technologies.

Bio: Unlike many of the other leaders in the custom installation business, Silver was neither a tinkerer nor a videophile nor a salesperson in a hi-fi store. Before founding Imaging Science Foundation in 1994, he was a businessman who dabbled in the real estate, automotive and medical fields. But a frustrating experience with a then-expensive big-screen TV more than a decade ago led him on a mission to create a better video experience for consumers. Today, ISF trains and certifies more than 300 dealers a year, consults with manufacturers to improve the audio and video fidelity of their products, and works to elicit ISF-quality A/V experiences from PC-based environments.

Best business decision: Leaving ventures that had become lucrative but were just not fun anymore to join people in more enjoyable ventures.

Worst business decision: Misinterpreting the "fun" in dysfunctional people. I seem to be a sucker for a good sob story, and have made at least five or six errors with people when staffing ventures.

Key opportunities and challenges moving forward: The essence of everything we do for clients comes down to managing their digital property and delivering quality analog experiences at their choices of time and place. During this primitive era we collect data on multiple hard drives in different rooms, on shelves filled with discs, in different doctors' offices, on accountants' PCs, and in wearable and mobile devices. Our future services will be based on one master storage device, and we will offer network and back up services.

Favorite books: *The March of Folly* by Barbara Tuchman—a historical account about how our societies seem hard wired to make very poor choices. It is a superb read that reminds us all to have a sense of humor about our failings. For business reading, *Trading Up: the New American Luxury* by Michael Silverstein and Neil Fink suggests that if we understand what we have in common with Victoria's Secret, vodka, golf clubs and kitchen appliances we will be better able to understand what our clients need.