

Hollywood staple to Hollywood star

Record-keeping is something of a sore point for some installers, but they can now turn to an engineering firm to take the hassle out of document management. **Paul Skelton** reports on the buzz around the Firefly Design Group.

There is an old adage that still rings true, particularly for the home automation industry: 'If you fail to plan you plan to fail.'

For many installers, mainly smaller operators, documentation is a time-consuming annoyance that gets forgotten or buried at the bottom of the 'to do' pile. But it is important to get it right.

Engineer Ron Callis Jr says he saw a need in the market to help installers get the basics of documentation right, so he created the Firefly Design Group – a professional outsourced design and documentation provider.

Based in Hollywood, Florida, and with several offices around the US, the company works as a support system for small installation firms that have trouble with document management.

"I'd say getting documentation right is imperative to the success of an installation," Ron says.

"You could certainly have a company that gets by without it, but you are putting yourself and your company in a precarious position.

"The team at Firefly are all engineers and system designers, and we have found that documenting the client's wants and needs all the way through the various stages of installing these complex systems is of the highest importance.

"Engineering drawings need to be collated so the customer and the integration crew have a roadmap for success."

Installers can commission Firefly at any stage during the installation. Some choose to work with the firm from the beginning for consistency, and others choose to unload all the pieces of the puzzle in the middle of an installation to help get the project to completion.

Either way, Ron says you should implement a fully developed, professional-looking method for identifying the customer's needs and wants

– stated and unstated – and defining the job parameters and scope of work.

This has three benefits:

- It looks sharper and more professional.
- It can lead comfortably into an 'upsell' situation that otherwise might not come up.
- It idiot-proofs the intake process, so even a relatively junior sales person can still catch all the important points on the first interview.

He says this will make the industry a little more professional, and ideally a little more profitable.

"Ultimately, documentation comes down to common sense, but we all come under fire and these details get missed."

So, why is the business named Firefly?

"Well, if you think of a firefly – buzzing around with its tail glowing – I saw that as a metaphor for our firm trying to bring light to the world. Plus, we may be small but we are doing our best to help this industry grow and evolve.



Installers all around the world no longer have to go through the tedium of documentation alone. Firefly can take an installer through an entire installation from inception to completion and produce a folio complete with artist renderings.

“When we’re working with integrators we are their team, essentially working in the back room. We don’t interface with the end customer.

“On occasion we meet the electrician or perhaps someone on site to help clarify things, but in most cases the end customer doesn’t know we don’t work for that integration firm. Our name or logos don’t appear on any of the documentation that goes out the door.”

Ron says the challenge so far has been that in many cases installers don’t charge for the services Firefly offers, so they have had to change the way things are done.

“In our opinion there should always be an engineering line item on every proposal that goes to a customer.

“A lot of installers say they don’t charge for engineering because the customer won’t pay for it.

“When I ask what engineering they do and how they show that to the customer the

answer is quite often that they don’t do any. Well, that’s why they can’t charge for it.

“So it has been challenging to get installers to do what we call proper discovery – finding out the scope of functionality and having budgetary conversations with customers – before entering into a detailed level of design.”

Once the customer agrees with the functionality and with the budget of the initial plan, detailed system architecture needs to occur – a detailed engineering design of all the nuts, bolts, screws and wire ties that are going to go into the system.

And, Ron says, this is something the customer should be paying for.

To help, Firefly is about to launch a front-end piece of software that will take installers right through the sales phase.

With it, after having a conversation with the client, installers can use the graphical software to help create a potential system and a low-end and high-end budget for the job.

The result will be a discovery document that is presented to the client stating the functional requirements for the project and expected budget range. The customer will then have a choice to modify the project requirements or move forward to the detailed design phase.

The functionality of products like Microsoft Excel has made producing graphs and charts easy, and PowerPoint has made presentations simple. But in an industry where the ‘wow’ factor counts, these programs just don’t let you stand out.

If you still use this software, you can be certain that many of your competitors also use it – a fact that will work against you in the long run.

“Many companies present proposals to a client who is prepared to spend tens of thousands on a system to make it beautiful, but then treat presentation as an afterthought.

“Excel spreadsheets have their place. But thanks to advances in computer-aided design

Ron's Top 8

- 1.** Hire Firefly ...
- 2.** Joking aside, installers should create an internally-managed file server for all project data. If someone leaves the company his data should not be lost.
- 3.** Use very simple file naming conventions so all submissions and receivables are well documented and using the same naming convention.
- 4.** Properly document your customer's expectations; the system design doesn't mean anything if you don't know what the customer was trying to achieve.
- 5.** Keep documentation up to date over the course of the project.
- 6.** Put a date on everything – every napkin you scribble on needs a date on it so it can be put into a chronological order.
- 7.** Scan all written documents and place them on the server so everything related to a job is easily accessible.
- 8.** Every time you have a conversation with a customer, restate the conversation in an email and ask for an authorisation or approval in writing. Don't act on verbals.

(CAD) technology and programming advances, it's possible for integrators to make a quantum leap forward in their presentations.

"Think about it – your customer thinks in terms of solutions, not in terms of products. But too many proposals consist of a list of products and prices, without any mention of the context in which these products are going to be installed.

"The context may be in the installer's head but that might not be enough when the prospect's eyes glaze over looking at the proposal.



Engineer Ron Callis Jr (left) says he saw a need in the market to help installers get the basics of documentation right, so he created the Firefly Design Group. With several offices around the US, the company works as a support system for small installation firms.

"Through Firefly, it's possible for your proposal to be a professional, sophisticated document that superimposes the integration plan on the floor plan for the house.

"There are integrators who are already doing just that. And when push comes to shove, those integrators are going to be the ones getting the big jobs."

Ron says another facet of his business is to create sales portfolios for installers.

"This document is a sale tool that helps installers show potential clients exactly what it is they do and how they do it. We have a graphic design department that makes the look and feel of the document unique to each integrator.

"These folios give our installers added confidence and they're leading to increased sales. I can promise you the competition doesn't have anything similar."

"After an installation is complete, and we've done all of these beautiful engineering schematics that have our integrator's logo on every page, we repackage them into what we call a customer portfolio.

"This is great for a referral-based industry like ours. We can do all types of binding and layouts, and the final product becomes a

coffee table book that the customer can show off to his buddies on a Friday night when he's watching the ball game.

"It's similar to what happens in the custom yacht industry. People spend \$50 million or more on a superyacht then are almost always presented with a professional bound book that highlights the story of their job, which becomes a giveaway for their friends and family."

The future looks bright for Ron and his team, with global expansion now squarely on the table.

"The best part about this business and providing professional services like this is that we get to provide these services to anywhere around the world. As such, we are considering expanding into the Middle East, by setting up an office in Dubai or Cairo.

"It's exciting to look at expanding, and we have a principle of doing business with people who are fun and will allow us to have a mutually respectful relationship.

"Really, we will go anywhere and everywhere people will have us." ■

c o n t a c t s
> Firefly Design Group
www.firefly-designgroup.com