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BOUND BY SOUND

Good quality audio systems in hotels, whether in open spaces or guest rooms, is a sure shot way to augment overall guest experience

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

If there is one thing guests immediately notice when they walk into a hotel, other than the design, it is the sound. Soothing music can immediately transport them into another world while a jarring note can put them off in a minute.

What this naturally means is that audio systems in a hotel are of utmost importance not just for guest relations but also to ensure that the solutions are practical and cost-efficient. While this might sound like a simple task, hoteliers need to constantly invest in R&D and in the latest products to deliver optimum audio

in any environment – be it in guest rooms or public areas.

The key lies in choosing the right equipment as far as audio systems are concerned and also ensuring that these are constantly updated and upgraded. “Recently, our sound infrastructure was redesigned to provide enhanced user experience in the ballroom. It was revamped with Tannoy ceiling speakers, Lab-gruppen C-series multi-channel amplifier and Biamp Tesira Forte digital signal processor. All these are controlled using Crestron Control processor (CP3). For live per-

formances, we have invested in a digital mixing console with MADI Interface. A full HD projector and tab tensioned screen is also installed to provide better visual experience,” said Nemaraji Sabapathy, chief engineer of Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway.

Hoteliers are also introducing these systems in the meeting spaces in addition to the lobby. “The main areas we have introduced these are in the conferencing facilities where guests conduct their meetings. They can use our high-end equipment to provide richer visuals for their video and crys-



tal clear sounds for their teleconferences, thus ensuring more productive meetings. In addition to this, we have replaced old TVs and audio systems in guest rooms and restaurants, with advanced versions, again ensuring a richer experience,” added Sachin Mahesh, head, special projects and IT, juSTa Hotels & Resorts.

In fact, vendors are also working with hoteliers to understand their needs and create solutions that are best suited to their requirements. Explaining how they go about it, Prashant Govindan, senior director, India & SAARC, Harman Professional Solutions said, “Our engagement with hoteliers begins with a design document that we prepare after understanding the specific needs of the solution that we need to provide. We work with multiple stakeholders including architects, facility managers, engineering and guest services, to come up with these specifications. Once these requirements are frozen and agreed upon we go on to create bespoke experiences combining audio, video and lighting technologies that not only enhance the overall ambience, but also improve the end-to-end guest experiences.”

Even, overseas, this trend is catching on. Maheesha Ratnayake, director, operations, Cape Weligama, Resplendent Ceylon opined, “At Cape Weligama we have installed multi-speaker Sonos audio systems in the rooms and villas. Given the level of comfort we endeavour to

offer guests and the long length of stay, we believed that this would be an essential amenity guests would love and we were right. In public areas, we have custom playlists made by a specialist company in London that matches the time of day and the guest mood we seek to enable.”

THE SOUND CONNECT

Managing an AV infrastructure requires staff who are periodically trained and certified to manage the existing set up and any future upgrades. As the trend shifts towards AV convergence, they must also be capable of handling basic IT infrastructure as well. Selecting and training these team members requires is, therefore, quite critical.

“In places, where we have standalone hotels and the requirement is limited. Therefore, we continue to outsource as per our need. However, where the inventories are more and we have more than one hotel, we procure these systems as a shared resource and the costs are easily recovered through frequent usage,” said Mahesh.

Kundan Attarde, director of engineering, Meluha The Fern Hotel added, “For small places like conferences and corporate meetings in-house AV services are more cost-effective. However, for bigger social events like weddings, birthday parties or exhibitions, the banquet halls might not be able to sustain with in-house AV services. Also maintaining inventory



Prashant Govindan, senior director, India & SAARC, Harman Professional Solutions.



Kundan Attarde, director of engineering, Meluha The Fern Hotel.

of AV products are more expensive than outsourcing the AV services.”

Outsourcing AV services has several advantages. It is cost-effective as it reduces the fixed cost – companies do not need to maintain inventories or worry about maintaining the equipment or manpower to manage it. This is a huge advantage as they will always have latest equipment and technology as well as a support system to handle it.

TREND CHECK

Increasingly, guests love to control of their in-room entertainment via their smartphones, using their own music source or the one that is provided by the hotel. Keeping this in mind, the current trend in audio system is to provide them with wireless audio or networked audio.

“Right from customisable ambient music that is selected based on the time of day to automatic volume control to interfacing with fire alarm and building management systems,



Alejandro Vidales, IT, Palazzo Versace Dubai said that companies are testing intelligent speakers using Alexa to control room features like air conditioning, TVs, or in room dining.



➔ Sachin Mahesh, head, special projects and IT, juSta Hotels & Resorts.

background music has come a long way from the days it was merely 'piped music'. In the guest rooms, audio is increasingly becoming part of the overall guest experience. With voice activated bedside assistance powered by Watson to an integrated entertainment package combined with music on demand, and waterproof speakers in the bathrooms, we are only limited in creativity," Govindan added.

Mahesh explained, "With the increased usage of smart phones and AI-enabled voice assist systems, we are exploring ways to use these to integrate our existing audio infrastructure to enable guests to operate in-room entertainment and other media through their phones." Over the past couple of years, wireless audio and internet radio has been steadily gaining popularity. Digital signal processing to correct room acoustics, wireless automated systems, cloud technology, sound wave management and zone management are also trending in this space.

Alejandro Vidales, director of IT, Palazzo Versace Dubai said, "Different companies are even testing intelligent speakers using Alexa to control room features like air conditioning, TVs, curtains, in-room dining or helping guests learn more about the city they are in. This seems to be an exciting time for this technology; great opportunities can be added to our guest's user experience - from information about the timing of outlets, weather forecast, special promotions and voice control in the room."

R&D IN AUDIO

A key element that drives investments in R&D is based on guest feedback. Again, while some hoteliers invest in these efforts internally, others prefer to outsource. Mahesh explained, "Our core business is, and will always be, hospitality. Therefore, we ourselves do not invest in R&D, but work with reliable partners who keep introducing us to these technological advances available in the market and after careful evaluation, if required, we procure them for our business."

On the other hand, Vinesh Gupta, general manager, The Den Bengaluru said, "We work with our sound consultants, and our head of projects, Samy Ohana, who is an authority on acoustics. It is interesting that even after 50 years of experience, he is still found at universities around the world doing research, learning and adapting to new technology. In this respect, the company has invested substantial amount of resources and money to always stay ahead in the world."

Considering that several audio solutions are outsourced, hoteliers need to ensure about selecting the right suppliers. Reliability, cost-effectiveness, quality and functionality of products supplied and after-sales services are the key criteria while deciding to choose their partners.

"One main criteria for selecting the AV service provider is their credibility in the field of pro audio and video design and implementa-

tion. We also analyse their previous engagements with us and get a feedback from their existing clients. The strength of certified engineers/technicians is also one of the parameters for selection. Of course, their association with industry leaders in AV plays an important role in selection," said Sabapathy.

AESTHETICS VS. ERGONOMICS

Since the audio equipment segment is large, hoteliers also need to understand where these can be placed. This relates to matching ergonomics with aesthetics and making the most of the space available.

"As most of the equipment can be rack mounted, standard equipment racks (19") are used with appropriate accessories (shelves, PDUs, fans, etc.) to ensure that the space allocated can be optimised. Adequate space is allocated at various locations in the hotel to accommodate AV equipment racks and entries to these spaces are access controlled," Sabapathy explained.

Today, since modern equipment is more accessible and manageable, this has freed plenty of space that earlier used to be allocated for this function. Using cloud, network and switch type modules saves a lot of area as well.

"We undertake restructuring of the space if deemed necessary by our projects team and replacement of redundant products to make way for the new installations," added



➔ Cape Weligama, Resplendent Ceylon has installed multi-speaker Sonos audio systems in its rooms and villas.

Mahesh. "We ensure that space allocated to AV equipment is audited weekly and monthly and periodic preventive maintenance of the equipment is done," opined Attarde.

According to Govindan, the accent in the audio systems space especially in the installed enterprise grade audio systems, the two keywords are scalability and simplicity. Customers today are looking for simple to access and operate interfaces for all audio systems. Coupled with scalability with digital audio interfaces and transport on standard IT networks, deployments have become simpler as well. "Cost and time taken have drastically reduced with higher reliability and overall quality of experiences," he said.

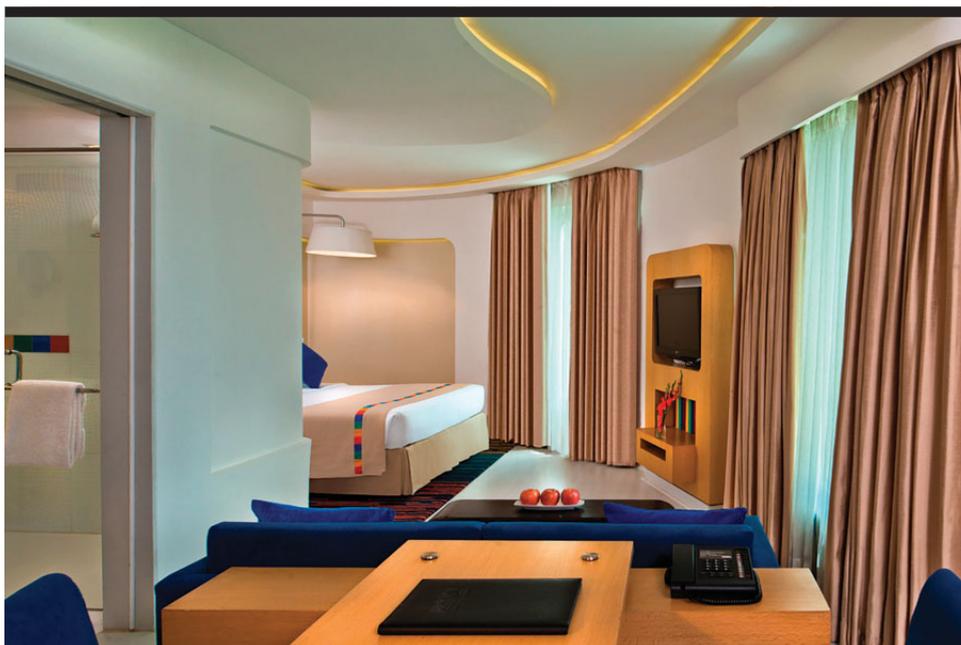
SOUND MATTERS

Hospitality today goes beyond providing a great room and good food; it is about catering to all the five sensory needs – sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.

"Today, sound consultants are as important as interior designers, and at The Den, we always believed in doing nothing but the state-of-art sound technology. Working with best AV consultants in the world leveraging brands like Bose, iHome and Kramer, we ensured that every area of the hotel is acoustically controlled. Even in guest rooms, we have iHome as a standard fixture as we realise that music is very personal, and guests may like to play their own music from their devices, and iHome is the perfect gadget to convert your personal space into a high-quality sound zone," said Gupta.

Again with audio equipment, hoteliers need to set aside a budget for newer technologies that will help us deliver better guest experience. "When a new upgrade is planned, an AVSP or a consultant is involved. The business requirements are discussed and the current infrastructure is audited and analysed by them. Basis their report and their design recommendations, we process the necessary incorporations and modifications," said Sabapathy.

Some of the current innovations



➔ A studio room at Park Inn By Radisson New Delhi IP Extension.

A 'Smart' Voice

Park Inn By Radisson New Delhi IP Extension has launched voice-activated smart rooms becoming the first property in India to provide an app-free in-room voice assistant that is powered by WebRTC technology. This is a collection of communications protocols and application programming interfaces that enable real-time communication over peer-to-peer connections. Six studio rooms in the hotel have been fitted with Amazon Alexa's Echo Dot devices that help guests to control lights, music and TV settings with voice commands.

They can also use the smart device to set wake-up calls, request room cleaning, in-room dining, laundry services and check-out. Saurav Dutta, general manager, Park Inn By Radisson New Delhi IP Extension said, "Integrating audio and video was necessary as we get lots of international guests who want to watch videos and listen to music in their language. The only solution was getting audio and video channels for different language from the internet as it was not possible to achieve this by conventional TV system. Therefore, we integrated Internet to the TV."

The hotel tied up with Kamakshi Clouds to embed Internet of Things and ensure that the solution did not require any change in

the room's infrastructure. An ordinary TV is connected to a device that streams internet content just like it would to as any computer or laptop in a simple plug-and-play fashion.

"We installed Amazon Echo Dot for various services. The guest can avail housekeeping, concierge and laundry services using voice commands. They do not have to dial the reception for these services. They can also switch the light on or off with voice commands. Using Amazon Echo Dot's feature, they can listen to news and music or set the alarm and reminders," Dutta explained.

With the voice-activated in-room solutions the hotel expects a 50% improvement in housekeeping efficiency, ensuring speedier completion of service requests. "In the future, we can have our own Bluetooth sound system that can be paired to Amazon Echo Dot. We have spent nearly INR 25000 for each room, which is not too exorbitant in comparison to the luxury services we are providing guests," added Dutta.

Besides elevating overall guest experience, Alexa's integration in the room can help the hotel to compile all the feedback, look into its shortcomings and then introduce refined solution in other rooms.

like smart phones are coming with AI and voice assist programs such as Apple's Siri voice assistant and Amazon's Alexa, companies are exploring interfacing existing products with these. "However, it is not necessary to introduce these as and when they are available; it is important to carefully evaluate and then procure it based on the requirement, feasibility, costs, scalability and ROI," explained Mahesh.

Technology will always be a tool or act as an aid for providing a good experience to guests. But with the right people at the helm, ensuring that technology has a human face is what will hold hoteliers in good stead. Ultimately, it all boils down to one thing – sound is no more about playing music in guest or public areas, but about acoustics and mood management, with the right amalgamation of rhythm and vocals. ■