Architect Explains Why He Doesn't Bring in Integrators Sooner

It's clear that architect (https://www.cepro.com/topic/tag/Architect)and host of "Build It Bigger" television series, Danny Forster, respects technology and custom audio, video and automation integration. He hammered that point as a keynoter at Crestron Masters 2019.

That's not to indicate that Forster thinks the architect-integrator relationship always runs perfectly. "One of the worst things I find in the interactions between my integrators and my clients is that they're made to feel a bit dumb," he said on stage.

That's not good, and perhaps it offers a window into why most integrators tend to struggle with building valuable relationships with integration firms.

The integration firms that have mastered the integrator-architect relationship tend to view it as an invaluable opportunity to learn about projects earlier and establish lasting partnerships with the architecture firms that trust them.

CE Pro sister publication, *Commercial Integrator (https://www.commercialintegrator.com/)*, recently wrote about Bellevue, Wash.-based Avidex (https://www.commercialintegrator.com/business_resources/avidex-profile/)which credits its unique relationships with architects and general contractors as a key driver of its recent growth.

However, many integration firms consider the relationship with architects to be elusive. I told Forster that many integrators think of architects as their "white whale" and he found that rather ridiculous.

"The white whale presupposes that they're hard to get. Why? Architects get solicitation calls for lunch and learns probably three to five times a day depending on the size of the office," he said, explaining that most architects are anxious to learn from integrators and it probably just takes a little more effort.

After Forster's Crestron Masters 2019 keynote, I talked to him about the relationship between integrators and architects. Here are some key points:

Why do architects tend not to bring in an integrator until later in the project cycle?

Forster: There is a desire is to have technical expertise available to the client and the design team as early in the project as possible.

That being said, that expertise has to be ready to participate as a consultant/expert. In other words, I don't need a salesman pitching to me at the very beginning of the process. What I need is to be onboarded.

My team is a team of architects and interior designers who don't know anything about the complexities of the work the integrators know about.

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It'd be great if they were there not to pitch their company, not to pitch a black box, not to pitch Crestron but rather just to say, "Here are a range of technology solutions that you and your client will benefit from."

We would bring them in sooner if we felt that they were going to be providing a design assist.

Why don't you like the term "needs assessment?"

Forster: I'm an architect. I am not in the A/V industry, so any critique I have comes as someone who was just looking from the outside in.

A "needs assessment" might be a great term that you all use. No one needs Crestron, right? You're not a heart surgeon, right? You're not an attorney for someone who's in jail. What you're doing is you're developing an experience.

For me, rather than providing a needs assessment, I'd rather have someone understand what the desires for the client are. What are the goals of the project? Just understanding not how the technology can help them but really, assuming they know very little about the technology and just hearing their story.

From their narrative, from their very non-technical narrative, can we produce a technological solution? Maybe a "needs assessment" is the right word for the community, but from my perspective, it's really just about listening to the client and hearing out what their ambitions are.

Can you talk about your comment that sometimes integrators make your clients feel dumb?

Forster: I guess what I was suggesting is that oftentimes technical expertise can be wielded to minimize transparency, meaning that a client may have some questions, but it's all too complicated and they don't actually break down the ultimate solution for the client.

I think it comes down to the salesperson trying not to sell but rather to develop a solution based upon and predicated on the needs of what the client has to say.

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— Danny Forster, host, "Build It Bigger"

I think from my point of view, the sales folks can certainly bring whatever technical knowledge they have.

At the outset, the client doesn't really need to get into the nitty gritty.

Try and whitewash your brain from it and don't show up with an a pre-approved set of ideas and what you think they need. I think that's a huge issue, which is walking in, seeing the space, hearing them say a few words, "I get it. I know what you need."

That's brutal. You may ultimately be right, but gosh, I would much prefer if we could all arrive at that solution based upon a process not by immediately landing on a solution because you know that's what's best.

It might be what's best, but allow the client and the experience to earn that certitude by going through a process.

This article originally appeared on our sister publication Commercial Integrator (https://www.commercialintegrator.com/)'s website.

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