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## Turning up the Volume with A-BUS

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An effective platform for multiroom audio aims at turning dependability, reliability, and long-term profits into standard options for homebuilders.

Homebuilders cannot afford to get caught up in all the hype about how good various multiroom audio options sound, even literally speaking. All too often, builders associate these products with higher costs, in the form of complicated installations, long-term service concerns, and a general delay in overall progress of a project.

While customer demand has certainly driven more builders to explore offering multiroom audio as a standard option in their new models, it has been met with a fair amount of reluctance. Distinguishing between products that simply look and sound good with those that also provide a quantifiable business value and translate into a better bottomline is where many builders struggle.

“From a builder’s perspective, their enjoyment comes from closing on the house,” says Peter Hoagland, chair for the Multiroom Audio Video Council for the Consumer Electronics Assn., [www.ce.org](http://www.ce.org), Arlington, Va. “There is no time for the builder to get caught up in how good a product sounds. However, if it is an option that the customer wants, they need to ensure they deliver it in a way that also makes the most business sense for their organization.”

Builders often determine the attractiveness of home technology options by a series of factors, says Hoagland. This includes whether or not additional wire than is already used is needed for installation, determining the complexity of installation, and if the process is easily repeatable.

“If they can put enough of these things together, that gives them confidence to add technology in the home and know that it is something they can make money on,” adds Hoagland. “Where they run the risk of losing money is when there is a complex installation, or the contractor cannot finish on time, or they are required to come back to the job (after completion).”

A culmination of these factors is why experts point builders towards category-5 (CAT5) multiroom audio distribution when looking to get their arms around home audio demands. Leveraging the CAT5 structured cabling infrastructure of a home, these systems allow for easy distribution and control of audio for homeowners with attractive profit potential for builders.

“There is a consumer demand for multiroom audio distribution,” says Shawn Smith, vice president, S&S Electric Co. Inc., [www.ss-electric.com](http://www.ss-electric.com), Oldsmar, Fla. “If presented with the options, we have found that more than 50% of buyers will purchase the upgrade to include some sort of multiroom audio in their home, even if it is just a prewire.”

Smith believes CAT5 audio is the best option for production homebuilders looking to deliver multiroom audio distribution. He adds the low expense and labor required with this method far outweighs the alternatives, such as single source multiroom audio, using a receiver/amplifier and standard volume controls, or multisource/multiroom audio distribution, which uses an audio switcher and in-wall keypad controllers.

Among those providing systems leveraging CAT5 include OnQ Legrand, [www.onqlegrand.com](http://www.onqlegrand.com), Middletown, Pa., with its LyriQ, and Oxmoor Corp., [www.oxmoor.com](http://www.oxmoor.com), Indian Springs, Ala., with its ZON Whole House Digital Audio.

Yet a growing list of multiroom audio providers and structured wiring companies are building on the A-BUS technology standard, [www.a-bus.com](http://www.a-bus.com). This CAT5 multiroom audio distribution technology dispenses audio signal, system power, and infrared data and status to amplified modules located in remote rooms over a single CAT5 cable.

“For homebuilders, A-BUS makes the process of multiroom audio easier,” says Andrew Goldfinch, co-inventor of A-BUS and founder of LeisureTech Electronics, [www.leisuretech.com.au/](http://www.leisuretech.com.au/), Rosebery, Australia. “Take prewire for example, only one low cost CAT5 cable is required from the hub to each room. Once a house has been prewired for A-BUS, a wide range of solutions is available, from a simple volume control solution to a sophisticated multisource solution.”

Invented in 1997 by Goldfinch and Len Andrews, A-BUS already holds a patent on its audio-over-CAT5 and trademark technology in Australia and New Zealand. LeisureTech was recently awarded allowance for a patent on its technology in the United States, and should be issued the patent in early 2006, according to the company. With the potential for multiroom audio generating profits in the face of a slowdown, builders can benefit from an education on the technology as well.

“While I think it is important for builders to promote multiroom audio, their motive has to be to increase the profit margin on their homes,” says Goldfinch. “It is not unlike the car industry, there is no profit in just selling the car; (rather) it is the add-ons and accessories that are making them money. What is important is how much effort is required to sell the add-on system.”

With 15 manufacturers currently developing products on the platform, homebuilders cannot only assure customers a range of long-term options, but also a highly attractive profit potential for themselves.

#### A Growing Favorite

“I can tell you, the one thing a builder does not want is a call late at night from a client accusing them of selling them garbage,” says Gidget Cogswell, owner of home technologies integration company Deco Systems, [www.decosystemsinc.com](http://www.decosystemsinc.com), Dover, N.H. “Inevitably if there is something wrong with the technology, that is what will happen. It will come back to the builder, not the installer because (the builder) is the one that (specified) the home.”

Cogswell paints a good picture for why builders need to align themselves with dependable technology. Customers will ultimately voice any and all displeasures with home technology to the builder, despite the fact it was the integrator/installer that put in the technology.

“I feel A-BUS makes it easy for a builder to understand the basic technology; at least enough to explain it to their customers,” says Cogswell. “This is important because the project managers have that initial contact with the client. I depend on them (to promote) things like A-BUS (to homebuyers) and they know that if there is a hang-up I am there to help.”

While A-BUS is an ideal option for production homebuilders, Cogswell has seen considerable interest from custom builders.

“I think the ability to benefit and profit from (product) upgrades certainly makes this an attractive offer for us,” says Greg Annis, project manager, Chinburg Builders Inc., [www.chinburgbuilders.com](http://www.chinburgbuilders.com), Durham, N.H. “The simplicity helps homeowners get excited about it, and by offering this it shows our customers that we are staying on the cutting edge of technology.”

A-BUS has been a critical component within Shepard’s Cove, a community located in eastern Maine, containing a mix of duplex homes and single-level residences. As one of the largest developments coordinated between Chinburg and Deco Systems, Cogswell says many of the units are fully equipped with A-BUS technology, as well as central vacuum systems and plasma televisions. In fact, the clubhouse on the property, which is used as a demo home by Annis and Cogswell, has A-BUS running throughout the entire facility.

Hodge & Co., [www.hodgeandcompany.com](http://www.hodgeandcompany.com), Ogunquit, Maine, a custom builder working with Cogswell, prewires all homes for audio and has done a considerable amount of work with A-BUS. In fact, Blair Hodge, president of the company, has made the technology standard in his own home, which he often uses as a showroom for strongly committed clients.

“I have a spec house going up in Maine for roughly \$1.8 million,” says Hodge. “For that kind of money I need to offer something special and build it as if I am going to live in it. I prefer a buyer come in and choose options they want, but in a spec home (I need to choose options) and that means having a system that is identical to one I have in my own home, (which is A-BUS.)”

Beyond being easy to use, builders stress how clean and compact the technology is within the finished home. With no wires or additional hardware disrupting the aesthetics of the home, an A-BUS system takes on the look and feel of common amenities, such as an air vent.

In fact, this is an example Jeff Kussard, vice president of strategic development with Russound, [www.russound.com](http://www.russound.com), Newmarket, N.H., says fits well with describing A-BUS. “I liken it to an air conditioning system,” says Kussard. “Homeowners know if they want it to their comfort all they need to do is make a simple adjustment. Beyond that, everything else is a mystery. (In a similar fashion) A-BUS simplifies home audio to the point where people say, ‘I don’t need to know the details, I just know that it is a good product and it is reliable.’”

John Sexton, new business development with Russound, says A-BUS not only provides a reliable starting point for builders exploring multiroom audio, but also a nice stepping stone to more sophisticated systems in larger developments.

“A couple of years ago, little if any production builders were installing multiroom audio, but the ones that were doing so were using A-BUS,” says Sexton. “A good number are still using A-BUS, but when you get into some of the larger price points, let’s say the \$300,000 plus range, (they want something with even more sophistication).”

For that midrange type of development, however, builders need to find a leg-up against the competition at a very low cost, beyond what is already provided.

“The truth is structured wiring is no longer a competitive advantage for builders,” says Dave Richards, product development, Eaton Residential Products, [www.eaton.com](http://www.eaton.com), Cleveland, Ohio. “Our penetration rate is above 70% with structured wiring (with our product), so that is not necessarily the key to bringing in a customer, as they expect that in a home. The key now becomes what else can you offer; by offering whole house audio, you get everyone excited.”

High costs associated with speaker wire and volume controls, as well as cumbersome installation issues have been major installation hang-ups associated with multiroom audio. Leveraging CAT5, which most contractors are familiar with installing, helps alleviate these concerns.

“The marketplace for our products is electricians, who are typically not fully trained in (highend) audio systems,” says Richards. “Rather, they are concerned with getting in and getting out. When a system is easy to install, such as A-BUS, it ultimately becomes a less expensive solution for the builder.”

While Tim Trautman, senior product manager, Honeywell Security and Custom Electronics, [www.security.honeywell.com/hsce](http://www.security.honeywell.com/hsce), Syosett, N.Y., can go into the details about how A-BUS eliminates the need for bulky equipment and the process of calculating the right power and wire gauge for multiroom audio, he believes the business benefits for builders is much more concise.

He says, “A-BUS is ideal for builders as it is repeatable, easily expandable from one home to another, and gives them an opportunity for an upgrade sale later on down the line.”

Competitive Edge

Providing home technology products and services for roughly 3,000-5,000 production homes annually in Southern California, JWE Corp., [www.jwecorp.com](http://www.jwecorp.com), Irvine, Calif., knows what attracts builders to these options.

“A builder is in the business of closing homes, typically they receive bonuses and incentives based on customer satisfaction,” says Tim Wilcox, vice president of sales and marketing with JWE. “Trying to install a system that is complex for a buyer is a nightmare, especially if they didn’t know what they were signing up for in the first place. We like A-BUS because we can install everything but the power supply during the trim-out phase. When a buyer moves in, all they need to do is plug in the power supply to have their system up and running.”

He doesn’t foresee production builders offering multiroom audio as standard anytime soon due to the fact they typically establish direct costs very early and cannot add approximately another \$1,000 to the main cost of the house; this despite the potential of adding an additional \$2,000-\$3,000 to the value of a home.

S&S’s Smith agrees, but believes the current housing boom is the biggest factor. “Because of the current boom, many of our builders are only putting (the minimum) in homes,” says Smith. “We are seeing entire communities selling out before the specifications are even established, so if people are willing to buy homes without knowing what features/amenities are included, many builders are willing to sell them homes without including any features/amenities.”

Yet as the market gradually creeps towards a slowdown, multiroom may help offset these conditions. During the NAHB Construction Forecast Conference in October, David Seiders, chief economist with the National Assn. of Home Builders (NAHB), [www.nahb.org](http://www.nahb.org), Washington, D.C., cautioned of a housing market poised to recede from peak levels. He points to growing evidence the Fed has begun to tighten and as a result, housing could start to lose some of its energy in early 2006.

“One thing I have seen in previous downturns is a push for more technology by builders,” says Wilcox. “What might happen is, as interest rates rise and new housing tightens, technology is primed to be an included feature as a homebuyer incentive. This would lend itself well to offering distributed audio, simply because the competition is not offering it.”

Goldfinch adds, “Builders can add tangible value to their homes by simply rewiring new construction for A-BUS. Consumers have 15 brands made to the A-BUS standard (and) the builder can also install a basic system without locking the new homeowner into an inflexible system; (rather) one that is easily upgradeable with added features.”