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Light at the Bottom Line

Integrators talk shading, drapery and light control



By Nancy Klosek

The Integrated Concepts show house, where customers can see integrated solutions in action

Shading and drapery—and the light control benefits of both—have not traditionally been at the top of the agenda when integrators and clients discuss a home automation project. They've long been seen as functional necessities that interior designers and architects must work into décor planning in the least obtrusive way. But the popularity of smartphones and tablets as automation controllers, along with

the advent of more sophisticated shading and drapery materials and motorization solutions, are rapidly changing that view.

Integrators have learned the importance to their profitability of proper client presentation of shading and drapery options—and of working closely with designers and architects synergistically, so that aesthetics and functionality blend seamlessly, to the client's delight. And vendors have taken notice; there are more brand players in the category than ever, and every control company provides the capability of third-party shading or drapery control as a

given, even if they don't offer the hardware or fabric themselves.

"It's probably the fastest-growing segment, percentage-wise, of our business," says Greg Simmons, vice president of Las Vegas' Eagle Sentry, a 36-year-old control and low-voltage integrator that got into the category around six years ago, and has since grown that business 400 to 500 percent.

"We'd been working with architects and interior designers for years, but mainly on theater rooms and A/V systems in the traditional sense. When shading became available to us, it was a natural fit, and we already have good relationships with them. It was natural to go to them and say, 'By the way, we have a really nice shading-control solution.'" Most designers, even if they are the drapery or shading provider, are quite willing to hand off automation. "The designer gets a kick out of coming in and making fabric selections from samples we have, and then we make the sale and automate the

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Shading, drapery and light control

product. But they're always actively involved and have input in the look, which is their biggest concern."

Simmons said it's imperative to have a demo on display to expose clients to what is out there. "They come in first and foremost because they're interested in security or home theater. Then we do the shade demo along with the lighting demo, and they're mesmerized by how quiet it is and how much it alters the room temperature. It's really something you have to show, and let the customer touch the buttons."

When the discussion has already happened between the designer and client before the visit to the integrator that there is going to be a window treatment, automated solutions "are a much easier sell," Dave Raines, president of Harrison, N.Y.'s Osbee Industries, said. "We position ourselves [with designers] so that they can make their normal markup. We don't rain on their parade, and we have a good relationship; that's what it comes down to."

But when clients come on their own into his facility just for systems integration, "they're not really thinking about motorized shades or window treatments, and they kind of brush you off a little. You almost need to leave that discussion for later, for when you get the project." At that point, he encourages them walk around his showroom. Raines has shading and drapery solutions "all over, on every single window. It's not that you stand in a corner and look at something; it's part of our space."

"Before we get into motorized shades, we also show some manual ones. But once we show clients iPad and iPhone control, and how they can schedule shades going up and down at certain times, their eyes open large," explained Ryan Heringer, president of Sound Concepts, Jonesboro, Ark. He added shading and drapery options in his 17,000-square-foot facility 18 months ago, and is the only integrator in the game in a 120-mile radius. "After shades, then we can show light, heat and air, and turn on music. You can only show a customer so much off a website." Heringer sells a half-dozen brands of drapery and shades as well as outdoor weatherproof screens that offer mosquito protection.

Most people are not aware of the insulation and UV protection that shading affords—nor are they aware of broader options like battery-operated mechanisms, which have become more robust in recent product incarnations. "For single-zone jobs, battery-operated cellular shades are big, because now anybody with a window is a customer. Before, you had to have wiring." Heringer tells customers who express concerns about battery life that "it's kind of like an electric toothbrush. Now, they make these little, efficient motors, and like



Osbee Industries president Dave Raines



Greg Simmons, vice president of Las Vegas' Eagle Sentry



Integrated Concepts owner Rich Babcock

Sound Concepts president Ryan Heringer



with the toothbrush, the power will last a long time. They understand the concept that way."

Doubtless, drapery and shading are an easier case to make in regions where there is a preponderance of sunlight. Rich Babcock, owner of Integrated Concepts in Fairfield, Conn., has a full-sized, unoccupied "show

house" to spotlight the gamut of integration solutions. Most of his projects are waterfront, so shading is a no-brainer: "There's glare and light coming into a room, and that gives [off] a lot of extra heat, so thermal and UV protection are important."

But with high-ticket clients, no matter if the location is in sun-drenched Vegas, or a waterfront property in Connecticut, or even rainy Seattle, a convincing argument can be constructed for high-level shading and drapery motorization and control because of the value of the rugs, furniture and artwork in clients' homes. With the appeal of roller shades, aesthetics comes into play, as well—particularly with contemporary architecture. "There's no way you can put a drape there or any kind of a blinds system that would look right. Roller shades can be very neatly integrated so they just disappear. It's this extremely clean, modern architecture, and then, when you need shading, you press a button, and there it is. It's about stealth, and about making it 'go away,'" Babcock said.

Even more impressive to smartphone/tablet-savvy clients is the nuance and precision their devices afford them in degree of shading control. "'Smart' shades are not like what in the old days was called a dumb motor, where you were the brains," he said. "It was basically 'up' and 'down.' Now you can track the shade position and drop it an appropriate amount for what you're trying to do—if you want it 32 percent down—boom!—it goes to 32 percent." Shade and drape materials are getting 'smartened,' too, he observed, with manufacturers adding different backings to change solar gain or loss in the rooms. "That's relatively new, and there are more options every day," he said.

Babcock is of the view that carrying shading and drapery and their motorization options deepens his working relationships with designers and architects. "If you're offering it, with the lighting, the A/V and the Internet solution, it's one-stop shopping and makes it easier on the homeowner and the architect."

Raines echoed that sentiment. "It shows we're more well-rounded, and that we understand aesthetics and design. It shows that we're not just 'the stereo guy.'" **CR**