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The Custom Home Theater Experience, Part 1
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If you've been around custom home theater long, you've probably heard someone say that you should be all about the home theater *experience*, rather than just buying products and services. That's a nice platitude, but what exactly does it mean, and how do you put it into practice?

For starters, to achieve an experience, you must delve into your psyche to meet the basic desires that drive everything we human beings do. It has been said that all our actions are based on seven main desires: Self Preservation, Freedom of Body and Mind, Material Gain, Recognition and Exclusivity, Love, Sex, and Absence of Fear. Of these, the most relevant to home theater are Recognition and Exclusivity and the Absence of Fear, which in this case would be apprehension toward undertaking a home theater project in the first place! In less-Freudian terms, you want to enjoy movies, music, etc., in your home and have something impressive to show your friends with as little worry and hassle as possible.

Practically speaking, there are definitely some things you can do to make sure your basic desires are met, but these things change as you move through the four distinct phases of a home theater project: Sales, Design (including engineering), Installation, and Calibration. In this article, I would like to share some thoughts on phase one – how you actually buy the home theater experience.

Start with a good demonstration. Smooth, professional demonstrations are absolutely the best way to prove to yourself that you can achieve an exclusive experience that your friends will recognize and remember. Search out a showroom of the highest quality workmanship. Be sure to focus on the performance of the room as a *complete unit*. Don't get hung up on individual equipment and accessories unless absolutely necessary. It will distract from the concept that what you really want is a means to personally enjoy media material...and impress a few friends here and there. Select appropriate program material for your demonstration. Keep each selection short, and resist the temptation to only use loud, frenetic passages to demonstrate the sound system. Those clips may be impressive, but remember that the people who are

supposed to be *impressed* are your *friends*. You are supposed to *enjoy* the experience, and there are many more facets to enjoyment than being impressed by bombastic sound. In fact, over-the-top aural spectaculars often have the opposite of their desired effect. Most people don't like being pounded by sound no matter how good it is. Carefully pick out clips that demonstrate the clarity and precise placement of sounds and the subtle details in the picture.

It's also important to decide what to listen and look for before you start. For example, listen for a particular line of dialog or subtle surround effect, and then try to describe what you heard. Take a similar approach with something like shadow detail in the picture. Decide what to look for, and then describe what you saw.

After the demonstration is over, talk about the design and engineering capabilities of any firms that are working with or for you. Have plan sets and drawings on hand, and discuss design and engineering processes. Don't dwell on these technical matters too long, though, or you may become bored. Think of documentation primarily as "eye candy" at this point, and pick what you use accordingly. Remember, your goal is simply to convince yourself that you have the technical expertise to achieve a very exclusive product. You're not arguing the finer points of home theater design!

Part and parcel with design and engineering should be a discussion about independent consulting firms. Simply put, you need to use them even if you don't think you need them. You're welcome to accuse me of self-promotion, but listen to me anyway! You may not be aware of this, but commercial sound and video contractors - who do for mega-churches, arenas, and performing arts centers what you are trying to do in your home - use outside design and engineering consultants in virtually every project. If they tried to bid on a job without expert consultants, they would be hard pressed to ink a single deal.

Finally, address your inherent apprehension toward venturing into a big project like a home theater by answering one question. "Am I making a good investment?" Your demonstration should be a big help on this one, but be sure to also consider the advantages of having a home theater. Think about all the cool stuff you and your family can do together in the room. Money spent on family time is always money well spent.

Buying into the custom home theater experience is important, but it's only the first piece in the puzzle. In a subsequent article, I will offer some thoughts on how to *design* a home theater experience. See you then!

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