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## Speaker Brand Selection

How important is it to select the proper brand of loudspeakers for your sanctuary? I can tell you that from a consulting and design standpoint, the primary decision is what type of speaker is appropriate. Brand selection is secondary after considering all the factors that make each installation unique.

You can certainly work backwards from favorite brand to specific speaker if you have personal experience with a certain brand and feel comfortable with their sound quality, price, pattern control, and customer support. In the cases where you don't have this personal experience and are relying on a consultant or installer to make the selection, you should take the time to understand their thought process in brand selection.

Everyone will tell you that their products are of the highest quality. Let's dissect the term "quality." First we have build quality. If a manufacturer produces speakers that are consistently the same and always arrive in perfect working order, they could say they are high quality. This is really speaking to their quality control process. High build quality or consistency can and should exist across the spectrum of product price points. The least expensive and the most expensive product could have the same quality in this regard. This measure of quality is easy to deal with because it is factual. The speakers arrive on time and in good working order, or they don't. How do you gather this information? Talk to everyone you can engage and look for patterns.

The best company can have a bad day and the worst company can have a good day. That said, be leery of uncorroborated information. If one person says a brand is great, that's nice, but until you get a second or third person saying the same thing, it is a questionable opinion.

Who should you talk to? Obviously, other churches. But, also go to your local community theater or concert hall and talk to the people there. Hang out for load-in and talk to the touring sound operator who sits in front of two or three different sound systems each week. Trade magazines are an interesting place to learn about new products, but keep in mind that this is not a two-way conversation. After all, magazines are marketing to you. You may also find chat groups or blogs on the Internet somewhat useful.

The second measure of quality has to do with meeting expectations. This is harder to put on paper, as it can be quite subjective. Let's start with the data sheet. Does the speaker get as loud as the sheet says it will? Is the pattern control what you expected? It goes without saying that the most subjective of all is the sound. Do you like it? Is a product high quality if you like the sound and low-quality if you don't? Does the next guy agree? Here again, look for patterns. Do some loudspeakers sound better for voice, while others sound great until you really pump up the volume, and yet do other loudspeakers sound beautiful as singles but fall apart in arrays... YES. Therefore, it's not just what sounds good to you, but what sounds good when used in your application. This is where talking to many people will pay off.

Keep in mind, when someone says a particular product is "the best" usually what they mean is, "the best loudspeaker in that specific market segment". This is one of the reasons why you often hear of two similar speakers, with vastly different price points, being highly touted. Therefore, you should be looking for a brand with high manufacturing quality and high performance quality in your price range. If it turns out that the performance quality is not up to your expectations you will need to move up a step in price point.

Your installer or consultant should be able to explain why they are recommending a specific brand. It may be that for your price point, a certain product has the best pattern control. If your sanctuary is highly reverberant, any slight difference in speaker sound quality brand to brand would be masked by reverberation. If the most important factor for your installation is good pattern control, you may find that some manufactures focus on this more than others.

Sometimes you may want to select a brand because they have a unique product that appears to be the best solution for your sanctuary. Put another way, your favorite brand does not have exactly the right product for your application, so you start to look at other options. Although there are many generic types of products where each manufacture will have their version, you will find some uniqueness out there. Sometimes this is exactly what's needed.

#### Brand assumptions:

There are some assumptions you can make regarding brands that are reasonably safe, but they may not lead you to best choice. You may be inclined to use a brand that dominates a particular market segment or that you have had a good experience with in a different segment. You are saying, "Because they do "X" well, I believe they also will do "Y" well". This is a reasonable assumption, but in terms of the due diligence you should perform before spending your church's money it may fall a little short. Consider a brand that dominates a certain market or that litters the press with adds to be doing something right. They have won wide-ranging acceptance from customers and have mastered promotion, but this alone should not make the decision for you.

#### Warranty:

It is important to compare different manufacturer warranty information, but installer support is more important. Every manufacturer will warrant against manufacturing defects for some period of time. But, keep in mind, that warranty generally doesn't cover blown drivers caused by inexperienced volunteer operators. Regardless of how a driver fails within or out of the warranty period, the few hundred dollars it will cost you or the manufacturer to repair or replace the driver is inconsequential compared to how long it takes to complete the repair.

Worst case.... It takes a week for the installer to arrive at your church and pull out the bad driver. It is shipped to the manufacturer that repairs it under warranty and then returns it to the installer. This takes a week or two. Then the installer has to schedule a time to return and install the driver. So, you didn't have to spend the \$150 to fix the driver, but you had no sound on the left side of your sanctuary for a month.

If service is your biggest concern and several manufactures offer products that will suit your application, the installer with the best plan for service should get your business regardless of the speaker brand. If an installer uses a particular speaker often, they may keep spare drivers in stock so they can simply swap out the drivers to get you up and running immediately. They also may be able to loan or rent a speaker to you while yours is being repaired. My point here is simple. Manufacturers warranty statements don't contain information regarding turnaround time for repairs. You will have to work that out with your installer.

In reality, the overall quality of the products in the marketplace is quite high. You should determine your needs in terms of performance quality level, service and price. If you want the best and can afford it, you have just made brand selection easier by narrowing the field. If you have virtually no budget, but need new or additional speakers, you will be considering a totally different set of manufacturers. Getting started with this approach will greatly reduce the time it takes to decide on a product type and, eventually, a brand. You will also end up with a product that fulfills your needs.

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