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From left: Jesse Howe,
Marie Howe and Todd DeAngelis,
Signals Audio/Video, El Segundo, Calif.

Power of **THREE**

A trio of executives with complementary roles drives Signals Audio/Video.

by Tom LeBlanc,

photography by Rafael Ortega



YOU WON'T LEARN ANY TIPS to help you run your business better from this article on El Segundo, Calif.-based Signals Audio/Video.

You *already know* that customer service should be paramount.

You *already know* it's essential to bid correctly to avoid tough conversations later.

You *already know* how important it is to answer the phone whenever clients call and react to their issues as quickly as humanly possible.

You *already know* that system designs should be meticulously engineered to account for every possible mishap.

However, businesses don't become profitable by knowing this stuff; it's how well a company follows through with its ideals that matter.

In Signals' case, it has a system of checks and balances that ensures that the company does what it says it does. Instead of the executive, legislative and judicial governing branches, Signals has Todd DeAngelis, president and founder; Marie Howe, vice president and partner; Jesse Howe, lead engineer and partner.

The three-headed executive team seems to have led Signals through the recession with relatively few battle scars. It didn't lay off anybody during what will be looked back upon as a brutal year for the industry.

At press time, Todd estimated that the company would be down about \$500,000 for 2009, which would mark an 8 percent decline. That's good compared with the average 51 percent decline experienced by CE pros during 2009, according to the *CE Pro* Readership Survey.

Even better, some of that 8 percent decline is the result of several large projects being delayed and pushed into next year. As a result, "2010 is looking great already," Todd says.

QUICK STATS

Company: Signals Audio/Video Inc.

Location: El Segundo, CA

Web Site: www.signalsav.com

Principals: Todd DeAngelis, president and founder; Marie Howe, vice president, partner; Jesse Howe, lead engineer and partner

Revenues: \$5,985,569 (2008)

Years in Business: 15

Number of Employees: 15

Residential/Commercial Split: 98%/2%

Specialty: Whole-house custom audio/video installation, integration and automation

Top 5 Brands: Crestron, JBL, Runco, Sonance and Sony

FYI: Provide the best customer service possible and just do a great job from start to finish. Over-deliver.



Todd DeAngelis, president and founder; Jesse Howe, lead engineer and partner; and Marie Howe, vice president, partner.

CHECKS & BALANCES

The photo on the cover of this issue looks more like a family portrait than a snapshot of executives. It *is* a family, says Marie, who is married to Jesse and affectionately referred to as "my little sister" by Todd. It might be that closeness that encourages the three executives to assume



Signals Audio/Video opened a 4,000-square-foot by-appointment-only showroom in December 2008.

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complementary roles — “a refined balance,” Marie says — that help the others succeed. Their official roles, though, don’t tell the whole story.



Marie’s official role: Runs office operations, oversees human resources and project manages.

Marie’s unofficial role: “Bulldog” (her word); she says her role is to be the go-getter, to find the answers and to “always shine on top with a smile.”



Todd’s official role: The former architecture student handles customer service, new sales, system design and project management; he also manages the service and installation scheduling, which he

calls “a job within itself.”

Todd’s unofficial role: The “easy-going” one, who “works well under pressure,” according to Marie.



Jesse’s official role: The “quality controller,” as he puts it. As a former mechanic that built race cars, his forte is on the project side doing engineering, research and development, design and documentation and leading Signals’ two in-house Crestron programmers.

Jesse’s unofficial role: The “high standards, pedal-to-the-metal” guy, according to Marie.

If pressed to single out a key to Signals’ success, Jesse’s role is a good choice because it has a trickle-down effect. He’s primarily responsible for the company’s bids, system designs and control system programming. Not that he does all the work in these areas, but he checks, makes changes to and approves the work.

Meanwhile, Signals stakes its nearly 100-percent referral business on customer satisfaction and service. It guarantees that customers will be happy with their systems and when issues arise they’ll fix them as soon as humanly possible. Signals really can’t back up those claims if the bids, designs and programming aren’t done exceptionally well.



Jesse Howe makes sure that omissions from system designs don’t come back to haunt Signals Audio/Video.

For instance, if the bids aren’t thoroughly detailed, it leads to unforeseen costs being added to the system price — and an unhappy client.

If the designs don’t account for everything while cutting back on unnecessary costs (Jesse says he’s constantly removing superfluous products from takeover projects) it leads to the installation time being extended — and an unhappy client.

Signals strives to avoid “gray areas” in its bidding, designs and programming. “We make sure there are no surprises, no problems that come up at installation time,” Marie says.

If the programming doesn’t provide for an intuitive system and include static IP addresses for remote access, it leads to confusion and an inability to solve problems quickly — and an unhappy client.

In other words, Marie says, Signals strives to avoid “gray areas” in its bidding, designs and programming. “We make sure there are no

surprises, no problems that come up at installation time,” Marie says. “We never go back to our clients with concerns because we didn’t engineer or bid on the job correctly.”

ANSWERING TO CUSTOMER SERVICE

Jesse doesn’t get all the credit though. Another key to Signals’ success is something incredibly simple: a policy that all employees must always answer the phone. Simple as it seems, Marie says it’s a huge differentiator for Signals. “It’s an area where we have been told that many of our competitors lack and end up losing clients [because of it],” she says.

It’s a policy that Signals ingrains in its employees and supports by issuing company cell phones with unlimited data plans. “We respond to clients via phone, e-mail or on site quicker than most of our competitors, even on weekends or holidays,” Marie says.

The policy also stems from a pattern of clients sharing frustration over not being able to get in touch with past custom electronics installers.

More than anything, though, it’s an example of Signals’ emphasis on “the small stuff,” Todd says. “That 30 to 60 seconds of phone time might just get us another referral.”

Of course, it’s not as simple as answering the phone. The policy is that employees — including Todd, Marie and Jesse — must answer their phones 24/7 and react to any issues as quickly as possible. High-level system design, programming and remote access lower the impact on employees’ lives and make it possible for Signals to back up its claims. “One of Jesse’s biggest responsibilities is to engineer these jobs and cover everything.”

Buttoning up designs to minimize callbacks is even more critical for remote jobs. The Los Angeles-area integrator does projects in Mexico and may soon be working in the Bahamas. “With remote jobs, you don’t have the luxury of just driving down the street,” Jesse says. “We work hard to make sure we don’t have to go back too often because we can’t afford to.” He adds that working on remote jobs

Being a Female Integrator



Marie Howe, vice president and partner at El Segundo, Calif.-based Signals Audio/Video, isn't the only female in the custom electronics industry — but it probably feels that way a lot of the time.

She's been hit on. She's been called late at night by clients that misinterpreted her friendliness. She's been dismissed as her colleague's assistant and called "darling" more times than she cares to recall.

After nine years in the industry, though, she knows how to handle it and has some good stories.

Marie recalls arriving at a job site for a new referral project. "The contractor, who must have been well into his 60s, said, 'Darling, you must be in the wrong house. Are you looking for the house with kids next door? Are you the babysitter?' I smiled, handed him my card with my left hand and extended my right hand to shake. He grunted, and never looked me in the eye again during that appointment."

Another situation occurred when Marie and Signals president and founder Todd DeAngelis met an affluent prospective client at her Beverly Hills home. "I went to introduce myself to her and she walked in front of me, back turned, and only greeted Todd. I was fumed and didn't know how to gauge a fellow female denouncing me so boldly. But I smiled, introduced myself and said to myself, 'You can do this.'" She did do

it and was instrumental in landing that job.

It hasn't always been easy — "Whoa! Let me tell you, what a learning curve!" she says — but Marie says she's learning every day. One adjustment has been that she had to be less friendly. "I learned early on that I was being too nice and that wasn't working."

It was often misconstrued — a problem that men aren't likely to have.

"I continue to work on my business relations with clients and always strive to keep the fine line of business versus being friends with clients. I've learned to stand tall, make sure I know what I'm talking about and continue to hone my craft. I used to read *CE Pro* while my girlfriends were reading *Vanity Fair*. No joke."

has helped the company raise its system design standards.

The company, though, wouldn't be able to back up its quick response claims if remote projects were the norm. "You learn to stay within your comfort zone," Marie says. "And 90 percent of our installs are in the same locations, so when service calls come up we may be just around the corner."

When a Signals employee does stop by a client's home, he or she will be dressed well and exceedingly polite, Marie adds.

They'll be wearing booties over their shoes "even if the customer says they don't have to," Jesse adds.

And they'll never put a tool directly on the client's property, according to Todd.

TAG-TEAM SALES

It's all about complementary efforts at Signals. It hangs its hat on customer service but it's only able to maintain superior service because of its high-level designs. Meanwhile, its high-level designs are made possible by its unique sales process.

Signals prefers a "tag-team" approach to sales, putting both Todd and Marie in front of prospective clients whenever possible. It's not because either can't handle it on their own; it's because they feel their skills — again — complement one another's.

Todd says he and Marie make a good sales team because they're both "good people persons" and they're both good listeners. As a result, they are adept at eliciting what the prospective clients really want out of their systems and never tell them what they ought to want.

They also take a lot of notes during the consultations and the site walks. The information gathered proves critical when the bids, system designs and programming are generated.

"They're the link to making sure the customer is happy," Jesse says. "Then I come in and fine-tune, make necessary adjustments and add things. Having all three of us involved works out well because, especially with long proposals, you get pretty close to them and they become a blur. It takes another set of eyes."

Since Signals specializes in large jobs (its project prices range from about \$25,000 up to \$800,000) it banks on many long, detailed proposals being dead-on. With stakes so high, "three heads are definitely better than one," Todd says.

Meanwhile, Signals has found that one male head and one female head are effective in closing sales. "In most cases, we meet with both the husband and the wife," Todd says, "so it's great to relate to the clients from both the female and male perspective. It's also great to bounce ideas off each other. Years ago, I told Marie she could stand out and become very successful in this male-dominated industry."

She has, but it hasn't come without a learning curve (*see sidebar above*). Signals is leveraging what is an uncommon tool during customer electronics sales consultations: a female point of view. Marie says the benefit isn't as simple as having the ability to bond with the wives. "Sometimes the wife bonds with Todd and I connect with the husband."

Truth be told, "I tend to think like a guy," Marie says — and having been with Signals for nine years she appreciates the technology more than most husbands. Still, her presence seems to stimulate conversations about the relationship between technology and aesthetics. Leading the conversation in that direction, of course, benefits a good CE pro.

The gender aspect is just a side note to Todd and Marie's sales

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process. “We gauge the clients,” Marie explains. “Todd taught me how to mirror clients. If they’re getting excited, we get excited. If they don’t seem sure, we take a gentler approach.”

There’s no denying that the tag-team approach works. Todd estimates that they have a 90 percent closing ratio.

TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Signals has 12 employees besides Todd, Marie and Jesse, who pass credit along to the staff.

The policy of answering the phone is nothing more than an empty marketing claim unless the staff is willing to take calls during dinner. And they do. Asked what Todd, Marie or Jesse does if they learn that a clients’ call, e-mail or request went unanswered, they say they don’t know because it hasn’t happened.

“We like to think we hit gold,” says Marie of her employees. The trick, though, is to refine that gold. Signals has all its installers attain CEDIA certification, which she says serves to “keep everybody on the same page” and “aware of specific building codes and techniques.” It also offers in-house training for specific areas like wireless access point setup, advanced automation and telephone programming.

Signals doesn’t use sub-contractors in order to maintain quality control, Jesse says. Working on big projects, therefore, requires technicians to be involved in every aspect of homes — HVAC, electrical, construction, pool equipment, sprinkler sys-

tems, security, drywall, generators, lighting and more.

Jesse says the slight slowdown during the recession will actually improve the staff’s proficiencies. To keep cash rolling in, Signals took on some smaller jobs that it traditionally wouldn’t take. Jesse says the smaller jobs and the slightly lower volume of work allowed them to observe the technicians more. “We got a feel for where they need to improve. We can really focus on their craftsmanship and that will help us next year.”

For the most part, though, Signals isn’t making major changes as a result of the recession, Todd says, but it will continue to take on smaller projects.

Marie says the economy prompted her to get even more organized and “to clean up our lines a little bit.”

Jesse, who of course had input on cleaning up product lines Signals carries, says he also emphasized trimming fat out of designs to increase value for clients and profit for the company.

Just as things always come full circle at Signals, so too does Todd’s explanation of how it emerged from the recession. “We’re blessed with a huge client base and they keep us busy.”

How did it get the huge client base? Referrals. How do they get the referrals? Customer service. How does it maintain its superior customer service? Designs. How does it maintain high-level designs? Sales consultation.

Not only does the circle get your head spinning, but it keeps the Signals staff busy. **CE Pro**



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(Digital) Horizons

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