

Geo Focus: India



Business

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With much of the West shaken by the downturn, is it time for India to make its move in the market? Matt Fellows studies this potential superpower as it finds its feet in the industry.

As the second-most populous country in the world, a cultural hub home to more than a billion people and one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, it's easy to miss the fact that India is also an up-and-comer in the global pro-audio industry – and a unique one at that.

Up-and-coming or not, India is still playing by the same rules as the rest of the world, with everyone feeling the burden of the economic climate; it's no secret that times are hard, but as we turn eastwards, a long way from Europe and the US, things start to look less grim.

“The Indian pro-AV market is certainly growing,” says Kumbha Young Grenier, CEO at Auroville-based acoustic consultancy Sound Wizard. “Overall the outlook is positive.”

Warren Dsouza, managing director at Mumbai rental company SOUND.COM, adds: “The scenario of India’s entertainment economy is promising and over the last few years we have seen rapid growth,” he reveals. “Adding to that the factor of globalisation and higher disposable income available with the Millennials, there is an increased spend on leisure and entertainment.

“All this leads to one key inference that the customer has truly come of age. I think this is a crucial factor which will define the market.”

And it appears a key element is emerging among this economic maturity, which may prove vital in the growth of the Indian pro-audio industry.

“There is a growing awareness for quality,” comments Grenier.

Dsouza agrees: “The industry is evolving and is moving towards an organised setup. There is an increase in demand for international standards in professional audio equipment and technical services. On the demand side, clients are not just realising the true value of professional systems and processes in sound reinforcement, but are also looking at it as an investment in ensuring a world-class production.”

This pervasive awareness of and demand for quality services and products is increasingly becoming a driving factor within the Indian industry, and may be the result of a more internationally integrated and interconnected market.

“I would say the biggest change is exposure; more people are aware of what is possible and are willing to try to achieve a higher quality,” explains Grenier. “It’s getting more professional and generally people are more aware of their options. The choice to opt for more branded suppliers is gaining momentum. With decision makers more frequently travelling around the world where they are exposed to systems in other countries, there is a desire to emulate the same systems in India.”

Bad practice

However, not all procedure within the industry is moving forward at the same speed. According to Grenier, India’s pro-audio industry is rife with congenital bad practice, particularly within the installation sector, which primarily boils down to a lack of consistent professionalism.

“There is a huge belief and trust in electronic technologies to solve any problem. This affects the approach to any pro-audio install, be it a studio, an auditorium or a nightclub; many people are convinced that if they spend on a bunch of

respected brands' loudspeakers and a load of gadgetry and string it all up, that it's going to sound perfect. Unfortunately, acoustics always have the final say in the result.

"Many sound engineers trust what they see more than what they hear, so if an auto DSP says it's doing something or an analyser spills out a reading but it still sounds odd, the technician will often go with what they see. Professionalism in the pro-AV field is growing, but still lacking; there are too many companies that think it's just about putting a bunch of branded boxes together and that's all good and is going to deliver. There is not much actual hands-on practical knowledge or even desire to do better than the next company. I would say a lack of care and passion, real understanding for the job is an area which lacks and surely needs to grow."

And this extends beyond the work itself, into the organisational structure: "There is a lack of good middle management project co-ordination," Grenier remarks.

"Too much is decided and designed on-the-go. There is often no real project brief with no one with authority to take a call during the design and install phase."

On the live side

So it would appear that while expectations and measures of quality service within the Indian industry are beginning to move in line with other countries around the world, measures of professional conduct still lag behind. Regardless, other audio sectors are doing much better thanks to the advancement and proliferation of technology, with the live sector in particular benefitting.

"It is important to analyse the influence of digital media – social media, mobile marketing, e-commerce, e-ticketing – which has also propelled the events and music industry," Dsouza continues. "The avenues to market live events, create the required buzz, both for the event company and the artist has only made it all the more enticing for companies to invest in India.

"International artists are touring India; electronic dance music and live music festivals are popular and so are the western classics, jazz and other genres. Over the last few years, the sheer number of concerts and events covering every corner of India from New Delhi to Shillong, and Rajasthan to Bangalore only stand as testimony to the fact that there is a demand, which will only grow – not just in the metros, but also in the non-metros."

Added value

Of course, whenever a market picks up, so does the number of those who wish to capitalise on it, and Grenier believes that this may be attributable to the spread of bad practice in the region.

“I would say the market is slightly overcrowded, with too many mediocre players bringing down the overall quality,” he explains. “It would be nice to have some excellent competition that delivers high level products, designs or services that will bring up the whole industry. It’s bound to keep growing and the only way to differentiate yourself is to deliver some added value to a project.”

According to Dsouza, this added value is none other than the delivery of the highest quality and consistency of service. “The concept of sound rental and services per se is not very different or new,” he notes. “However the success of any company in this space is to be able to deliver its big gigs in a scale matching international standards, in addition to its ability to handle the not-so-large ones in a similar fashion, without compromising on the quality.”

One to watch

It’s clear that the market is changing. India is coming into its own, but even as the landscape shifts, the one thing that can be relied upon to remain constant is the need to deliver quality services in line with an ever-heightening expectation.

“With the influx of global professional audio and gear companies and their businesses in India, the market is moving towards being an organised set-up,” says Dsouza. “Having said that, on the sound rental front, we see lot of work and interesting projects coming our way. The name of the game is to innovate and stay ahead.”

And as the market approaches this organised set-up format, it is important to note that to stay ahead, attention must be paid not just to quality of product, but to organisational infrastructure in order to steer clear of heavy fiscal consequences.

“More planning and professional project managers will emerge,” Grenier predicts. “The cost of bad project management is going to start being increasingly realised and proper planning will gain importance. Communication will also change for the better, with more documentation and reporting to maintain everyone’s accountability during projects.”

Indian pro-audio companies will have to hold to these principles with unwavering dedication if the national market is to grow into the powerful contender it has the potential to be. As it enjoys an exciting period of growth, India is certainly one to watch in the future.

