

Distributed Audio in 2021

Whilst I'm not a fortune-teller nor do I have the power to see the future, here is my best guess at what next year is going to look like for the world of distributed audio. I'm optimistic that the pandemic that we are in the depths of will start to subside next spring (in the northern hemisphere) with the rollout of one or more vaccines and warmer weather and I will base my thoughts on this assumption.

In all of what I have to say, the premise of helping people feel comfortable and safe moving back into public spaces is most important along with giving them reasons to want to do this.

Hospitality & Retail

This is the main market segment for Bluesound Professional and this sector (and all of the business involved in it) has been dramatically affected by the pandemic. I believe that the key to recovery is providing delightful, immersive experiences which are impossible to create at home. The best way to do this is to engage as many of your senses as possible and as three of them are currently to various degrees unsafe – those of touch, smell and taste, this only leaves sight and sound.

We are all fortunate to be working in the AV industry as these two senses are those that we deal in. Sight has been used as the key sense in any environment throughout time, so sound is the easiest way of amplifying the experience. Adding a congruent audio stimulus to the video stimulus more than doubles its impact and effect.

Our industry has a pivotal role in helping businesses in the hospitality & retail sectors to rebuild. The first part of this is in giving their employees ways of safely interacting with AV systems in order to preserve their health and minimize any fear that they have in returning to work safely. We at Bluesound Professional (as hopefully most companies have) have been working on this challenge and have the following ways of safely interfacing with our equipment:

1. Voice control with either Amazon Alexa or Google Home. We added this capability during the lockdown to provide a 'no-touch' control system. When using voice control in a noisy environment, we recommend putting the control device in a quieter space like a back room.
2. The use of personal devices. BluOS can be installed onto employee's phones, tablets or laptops and these can act as control devices. Many employers don't want their employees using their mobile devices when at work, but these devices (hopefully!) only have the employee's own germs on them, so they are a safe interface. As Bluesound Professional products can be password-protected when using BluOS, employers can limit access to trusted employees and then once other methods of control become safe again, they can take away this access once more.
3. CP100 wall mount controller. Although you have to touch this controller, its surfaces are glass and aluminum and with no knobs, switches or other crevices, the controller can easily be wiped clean and sterile.

4. Scheduling. BluOS includes scheduling capability and this allows users to automate and schedule any changes needed throughout the day or on different days, thus taking away the need for any local control at all.
5. Remote control. We have recently implemented the capability of remotely controlling players through VPN's with only a couple of ports needing to be open. This was in response to several customers wanting to control all of their branches from their head office, but again this removes the need for any local control of the system.

Having provided ways of safely controlling a system and thus reassuring employees, the next and vitally important task is to educate users about ways of improving their audio experience quickly and cheaply. It would be excellent if hospitality and retail businesses used the downtime that they have had during this pandemic to re-equip their audio systems and to come back stronger, however many businesses in this sector are just focused on getting to the other side of this crisis intact.

Next spring, as businesses start to be able to reopen and attract customers, a really easy way to upgrade their audio experience is to install a streaming front end to an existing system. This will give the business access to a huge variety of content, allowing them to freshen up the music that they play quickly, cheaply and easily. That restaurant which has been playing the same CD's or listening to the same radio station for the past decade can ring the changes with access to almost unlimited content choices.

Also, in the spring, businesses – especially restaurants and bars – will want to open outdoor spaces because of safety mandates, to entertain people waiting to enter spaces or simply because people feel safer being outside with good ventilation. Our newly introduced BSP500 and 1000 indoor/outdoor network speakers which are powered by PoE+ (or PoE++) allow systems to be expanded into outdoor areas with no high voltage wiring and only one cable to each speaker.

Finally, as people have become accustomed to ordering online and visiting physical spaces for collection of orders, these spaces may become smaller and more crowded, therefore systems as such the PoE+ speakers mentioned above which avoid the need for equipment racks might prove really useful.

Corporate Workplaces

As people are able to go back into offices, businesses will have to entice workers back out of their home to commute into offices again. Some people can't wait to get back, but others enjoy the flexibility of working from home and value the time saved by not having to commute. Workers will come back into offices gradually and in socially distanced ways, and we are hearing already that this is leading to spaces that are too quiet where people feel worried to speak for being overheard or disturbing others – the 'library effect'. Offices are installing systems capable of playing music, reassuring soundscapes (reducing stress) or biophilic sound

masking to ensure privacy, and Bluesound Professional products can provide this content as well as interspersing messaging promoting healthy habits.

It has been said that the workplace is the new hospitality as workers no longer feel like they have to work from offices, and so employers are making spaces with a variety of facilities. Music in leisure or relaxation spaces can enhance the experience and give their workers extra reasons to return.

Healthcare

This sector unfortunately has seen the reverse trend with these spaces being overwhelmed throughout the pandemic. As vaccines are rolled out, people can be reassured when coming in to be vaccinated with appropriate audio content, again including both reassuring soundscapes and health messaging. In addition to this, soothing music in healthcare worker relaxation areas can help with the hugely high levels of stress that these workers are under.

All in all, 2020 was a very difficult year for the industry. The events sector was close to zero, the hospitality & retail sector was also well down, and no commercial sector escaped unharmed. My belief is that with the rollout of a vaccine in the early months of 2021, next year could reach the business levels of 2019. In order to be successful in this new world, system integrators will have to think carefully about the real value that they and their solutions provide. The closer that they can get to providing delightful immersive experiences, the more value they will create and the more successful they will be. We at Bluesound Professional have both developed and adapted our products to help with this value creation as well as with helping users to feel safe.

Audio will be the key to success in 2021 – use it wisely and sell the value of your solutions whilst all of the time being aware that your customers businesses will be fragile and under-financed after the crisis of 2020 so really focus on creating the maximum impact for the minimum cost.

Good luck and I wish you a very successful 2021 and beyond.

Graeme Harrison
Vice President and General Manager
Bluesound Professional