



Top Stories:

Bringing the Very Big Picture to TV News

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by | By Scott Goldstein

Paula Zahn, star of her own prime time news show on CNN, was introducing a story on Arnold Schwarzenegger. Plans were for video of the then-candidate to appear over four 60-inch plasma TV screens behind the anchor.

The show's director referred to the screens—awaiting their on-air debut—as the “McCann Wall.” That was the first time Frank McCann, president of the Edison company that provided the system’s underlying technology, heard that phrase.

“The people in the control room said to me, ‘This better work because it’s got your name attached to it,’” recalls McCann, who was in the studio for the program’s September debut.

Sure enough a huge picture of Schwarzenegger climbing the steps of a California state building appeared seamlessly behind Zahn on the shiny new set of her show, “Paula Zahn Now.” McCann, 39, claims he was never worried, saying, “It went off without a hitch, as we expected.”

When McCann founded his audio-visual design firm he specialized in building high-tech corporate conference rooms. Then the economy contracted in 2000 and companies pared spending. McCann Systems adapted by establishing itself as an expert in providing the fancy visuals that are increasingly de rigueur on the sets of television news shows. Over the past three years, clients have included CNN, HBO and WNBC Channel 4. “Our company actually grew when we should have been downsizing,” McCann says. A series of high-profile assignments this year helped.

Work on the “Paula Zahn Now” set, which features four plasma screens capable of showing multiple live feeds or one massive image across all four screens, was finished in September. McCann installed the screens and provided the technology allowing the control room to toggle among images and feeds.

In July, it did the same for the new set of CNN’s “Lou Dobbs Tonight,” which features a collage of plasma screens and a monitor that slides on a track. The previous month, McCann had provided WNBC Channel 4 News in New York City with an unprecedented 26-foot wide, 7-foot tall plasma screen backdrop that uses four projectors to show streaming images of the Manhattan skyline, complete with water shimmering in the

foreground and cars negotiating the FDR Drive.

The company has also done work for CNN's "American Morning" show and the now-defunct "Connie Chung Tonight" as well as having provided plasma screens for the studio of HBO's "Real Sports With Bryant Gumbel," and the set of "National Geographic Explorer," which is developing a hipper, more MTV-style studio. Each installation brings McCann Systems between \$300,000 and \$500,000, plus money from the annual service contracts which run between 10% and 15% of the project's cost. This year, fueled in part by the big-screen contracts plus the expectation of more to come, McCann Systems anticipates record sales topping \$10 million. It came close to that last year, says McCann. Sales in 2001 were \$6.5 million.

"News sets have become more sophisticated over the past one or two years," McCann says. "Producers and directors are seeking cutting-edge ways to deliver the news and they find us to make the images work." He expects the upcoming presidential election and Olympics to drive more business as well.

Powering this is the networks' battle for any possible advantage. "It's a very competitive industry," says Clayton Sizemore, CNN's director of operations in New York City. "Editorial content is the heart of what CNN is all about—but we try to look good doing it."

Another factor is the spread of high-definition television. These sets offer three times the resolution of traditional TV, exposing every dent and scratch, Sizemore says. "Viewers can really see blemishes that they could not before."

Before this wave of news-studio upgrades lifted McCann Systems, it had been fueled by the dot-com boom. DoubleClick, the Internet advertising firm, was a client. McCann built conference rooms and learning centers in multiple DoubleClick offices in the U.S. and overseas. Other clients for conference rooms, high-tech offices and learning centers have included Alliance Capital, Chase Manhattan, UPS, Thompson and Princeton University. Corporate business, though less of a growth area, still comprises some 75% of McCann's sales.

"They take a somewhat obscure industry and bring it into laypeople's terms and this pleases client corporations," says Arthur Metzler, president of Arthur Metzler & Associates, a New York City engineering firm that has worked on projects with McCann.

When the office construction sagged, McCann used his networking skills and adopted a "never-say-we-can't-do-it" attitude to garner subcontractor work for production houses such as PDG Designs, Jack Morton Worldwide and Pyburn that built television news sets.

"For WNBC, they said they wanted to see an example of a 26-foot-wide hard screen," says McCann, "and I said, 'You can't because it's never been done.' So they gave us a retainer and I built a mock-up in the warehouse." Now it's the backdrop for their

6 p.m. and 11 p.m. news programs.

McCann has had a long-term fascination with audio-visual equipment. In 1985, at age 21, he moved to Brooklyn from Ireland. Four years later, he moved to New Jersey where, among other jobs, he installed home theater systems for Woodbridge Stereo. But he longed to do commercial work, where the big projects were.

So in 1996, with three children, a wife and a \$1,600-a-month mortgage, he quit his job and started McCann Systems in the basement of his Sayreville home. Roy Gelber, a friend who manufactures parts for hobbyists, soon invested \$100,000 in the new firm and gave it a small office at his Raritan Center-based office. The first year, thanks to his contacts and serious networking efforts, McCann had \$600,000 in sales.

Now, seven years later, McCann and Gelber's companies share the building, including a warehouse, for a total of 20,000 sq. ft.

McCann has 25 full-time employees.

"Frank and his group has worked very well with us and the technology has been effective," says CNN's Sizemore. "When you blink, there's a whole new level of technology out there so you always have to be on the lookout for the latest." McCann has no trouble picturing that.

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