

Avoiding the Race to Zero

Impressions are everything at JML Audio of St. Louis

By Todd Ramsey

It's something every independent retailer struggles to achieve. Choosing and offering the right mix of products and services that keep a business profitable while ensuring that you're building a loyal and frequent customer base.

Over the past several years, aftermarket mobile electronics retailers have certainly experienced the challenges of those struggles firsthand. Some have had a grueling time scrambling for the crumbs in their market while others have created more defined and resolute go-to-market strategies that breed long-term success. JML Audio of St. Louis, Mo., is one such successful independent retailer who is in it for the long haul. They are all about providing an outstanding impression.

These days in an independent retail environment, **HOW** you install is as opportune as **WHAT** you install and sell. To package the whole thing as thoughtful solutions designed to meet or exceed expectation

is an impression that customers do not soon forget. They enjoy their vehicles more and they focus less on the nickels and dimes of getting those results. We are, after all, selling entertainment in the audio segment of our business.

According to Joshua Landau, System Design Consultant for JML Audio of St. Louis, "We are careful not to trivialize any client relationship no matter how small it may seem. In the long run people's positions change and grow and you want them to remember you no matter where they may go."

Indeed this philosophy has helped JML Audio grow from 21'x25' garage when the company began in 1997 to their highly tooled and outfitted 3,890 sq. ft. facility today. Landau remarks, "Our biggest thing was to invest in our tooling and training early on so we would separate ourselves from all the other places in town." By all measures their dedication to taking the high road is paying dividends for the retailer these days.

Taking a New Approach

JML Audio avoids the commodity business of race-to-zero electronics by embracing the OEM Audio Integration category, specifically adding on to existing factory head units/amplifiers to improve the overall sound in the vehicle without changing what the client already knows how to operate in the dash.

"Many of our competitors try to switch out the head unit first, where for us we usually switch out the source unit last, if at all,"



Joshua Landau, System Design Consultant for JML Audio of St. Louis



The JML Audio facility, at 3,890 square feet, designed four years ago, was built with a lot of thought and preparation. Pictured is the installation bay.

explains Landau of their approach to getting great sound in today's complex and highly optioned cars.

Keeping the factory head unit is a challenge for many of today's retailers and not for the reasons you would think. It's not because of performance compromises in the factory head unit itself (audio signal outputs are often very clean and stable in today's factory head units). Rather it's because many are doing the same old thing in the same old ways—taking parts out and replacing with after-market, starting with the head unit rather than the other way around—improving speakers, adding amplifiers, etc.

This approach to removing the factory head unit often requires complicated adapters or interfacing into integrated HVAC or other vehicle controls that are part of today's dashboard electronics. Integrating into the head unit from the factory is often a much more streamlined method to get what the customer really wants, which is a greatly improved



Interactive Experience Displays were built to engage customers.

Efficient use of space is of extreme importance to the team at JML Audio of St. Louis.



sound. "From our experience over the past few years there are a number of competitors trying to work off the factory source unit to deliver great sound; however, due to a lack of knowledge and tooling on their parts, they have yet to do it properly and with any broad-ranging success," says Landau. This is where JML Audio of St. Louis leaves highly capable impressions on clients.

Marketing to New Customers

The ability to successfully and profitably conduct integration with today's cars certainly requires an understanding of the systems and the tools to make appropriate measurements that influence equipment and interface choices. JML Audio has a good investment in many of those tools, including oscilloscopes, real time analyzer (RTA), polarity detectors, various specialized test leads and other specialty tools. Landau estimates about 20 percent of JML ▶

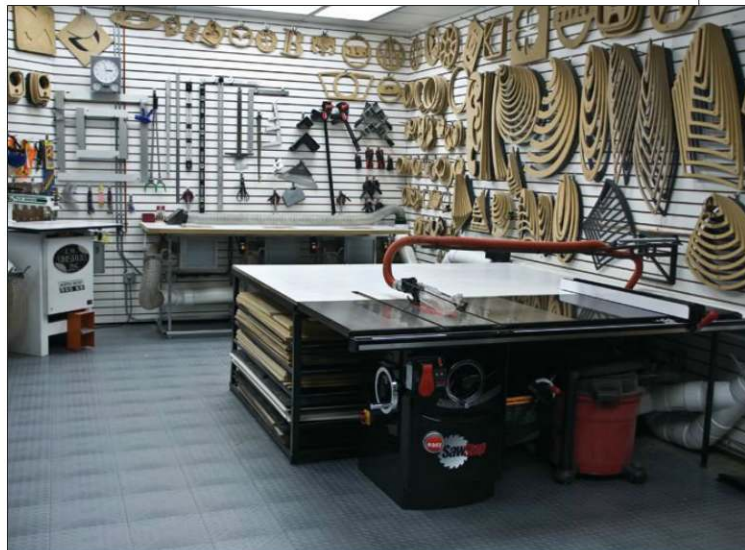
Audio's business is integration that includes retention of the factory head unit. "We focus more on making great sound and less about the client worrying about exactly every single piece and part it takes to achieve it," he adds.

JML Audio still participates in selling the mainstream car audio products too. "Yes, we sell head units," explains Landau. Like many other terms Landau uses to push the perception upscale, he calls them 'source units' to the clients so there's even more distinction between JML Audio and any competitors. "We support two specific brands when it comes to source units. We realize that we cannot be everything to everyone nor do we want to be. Because of this we choose our vendor partners very carefully," says Landau.

Are customers going to shop around, even JML's clientele? Sure they are, and Landau knows this. "Shopping around is highly encouraged and if they have been doing some shopping around it is easier to have them see what makes us stand out. If we are their first visit we like to set the standard with our impression on them that all other shops will then need to follow. Either way it is a win-win for us in the end," says Landau.

Advertising-wise, JML Audio of St. Louis uses a range of new and old methods for their client outreach. "We use our website and Google organic search with continued SEO refinement, but we're also still very focused on fostering the word of mouth and referrals among existing clients to capture new ones," says Landau. JML Audio stays in contact with existing clients with phone calls, email marketing and even personal visits. It's a strategy that has tangible results as Landau says, "After they have become a client, it is no longer an issue of

Above all, JML Audio values great sound.



JML Audio also has its own wood fabrication station in the new facility.

'if' but 'when' we'll do business with them again.

Designed to Differentiate

JML Audio of St. Louis is actually located in the St. Louis suburb of Fenton, Mo., where they face strong market competition. Big box, regional chains and other independent retailers are all part of the greater St. Louis market so it's important for Landau and his three technicians to differentiate their services and approach to solutions so they will

leave a lasting, positive impression on customers.

The JML Audio facility, designed four years ago, was built with a lot of thought and preparation.

"Because we built interactive displays and one of the most advanced small workshops in the area, and because we never stopped attending various trainings, we've constantly been pushing our skills and presentation to the next level," explains Landau. The facility really does leave quite an impression on its own.

Efficient layout of space and maximizing the amount of bang-for-the-buck in a customer's labor dollar spent are all part of how Landau sees the JML Audio value.

"We have really been able to maximize our efficiency while working on fabrication in our new facility—having various rooms and stations to perform all the necessary tasks with minimal bit change out or equipment moving," he says. One look at the place and anyone could tell you that JML Audio is walking the walk of the high-end talk. The steady stream of satisfied clients seems to back it up. That's how JML Audio is keeping their business focused for the long haul.