

Company puts technology in your home

Advanced Residential Systems installs security setups, home theaters and other gizmos.

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If you're a gadget freak, you probably think Tom Kucsan has one of the coolest jobs around.

He sells and installs whiz-bang home theater systems, including those plasma TVs you hang on a wall, and all kinds of technology to automate your home.

And most of the automation can be operated from a keypad on the wall, a computer or telephone -- from the lights and security system to the heating and air conditioning. You could even shut your garage doors or turn on your Jacuzzi with a call from your mobile phone.

For a small company -- just four employees -- Advanced Residential Systems of Allentown has garnered big-time recognition.

The August cover of Audio Video Interiors magazine featured a job the company did near Philadelphia. And in September, the company won an international award for the best integrated home for installations of between \$60,000 and \$125,000.

The award from the Custom Electronic Design and Installation Association was given after electronics companies from all over the world attended an exposition in Indianapolis and voted on the best projects.

"It's a very big deal to be awarded this," said Brittany Nims, spokeswoman for the industry association. "It's the premier industry award."

Some of that success might come from how the company figures out what a customer wants.

"I try to garner information from them in the sales process," Kucsan said. "What do you want? Don't tell me what brands you want. Don't tell me what kind of keypads you want. Don't tell me where you want them.

"Tell me how you want to live your life and what you want to have happen."

The company's approach worked for customer John Biggar of Center Valley, who said he was pleased with the home automation work Advanced Residential Systems did for him.

"They do a lot of really nifty stuff," said Biggar, who can control much of his home automation from the personal computer in his den.

"I like to play with it, but you don't need to be a techie guy to use it. It's relatively straightforward."

And the installation itself was pretty painless, Biggar said.

"Their workmanship is good. They're there, they're gone. There's no mess to clean up or anything like that."

The technology doesn't come cheap. A small-scale job for Advanced Residential Systems runs about \$10,000.

For that kind of money, the company can install high-capacity wiring in a new-construction home, a small home theater setup and a home automation system, Kucsan said.

Many of the company's customers tend to have high-end homes, he said.

"There's a certain clientele that will go to Circuit City, always look for the best price on whatever they can get and take it home and do it themselves," he said. "And then there are people who hire people like us to come in and do things. And when it's all done, we sit down and teach them how to work it.

"I use the analogy of changing the oil in your car. It ain't rocket science. You could do it yourself. But do you want to?"

Advanced Residential Systems works throughout the region, in the Lehigh Valley, the Philadelphia suburbs, central New Jersey and beyond. And business has been good since Kucsan and his partner, Andrew Preston, started the company three years ago, after they left jobs as installers for a stereo equipment company.

If there has been an economic downturn, nobody told all the people who are calling ARS to wire up their homes, Kucsan said. He has seen no slowdown.

"None whatsoever. We're growing," Kucsan said. "We have one project that has been going on for three or four years. It's not like that guy is going to put the kibosh on the project because the market took a slide after Sept. 11."

While the big TV screens, networked computers and automated lights and shades are the fun part for the customer, choosing those things is not the first step, Kucsan said. First, you need the infrastructure, the high-capacity wiring, called structured wiring.

"For somebody who's building a house today, if they were going to spend money on one thing, I'd tell them to spend it on structured wiring," Kucsan said.

"As far as the gee-whiz factor, that's going to be the lowest priority on their list, but that's what they need."

Electronic gizmos of all kinds can be added later, but they all need to be hooked up to high-quality wiring, he said.

"As technology changes and things get cheaper, you have to give the customer the flexibility down the road," he said.

And what about wireless systems?

"Do you like your cell phone?" he asks. "Does it work 100 percent of the time? End of story."