YAMAHA
Make Waves

ATTRACT, TRAIN AND RETAIN
VOLUNTEERS

by Doug Gould, Worship MD

THERE ARE A LOT OF CONSIDERATIONS AFTER DECIDING TO IMPROVE, replace or install a new audio system. Sound systems are made up of many parts, and the weakest link can negatively affect the whole. In many cases, that weakest link is often not gear but people — those charged with operating the system.

In this guide, I hope to provide you with an understanding of the elements of church sound systems, the different environments in which they will be used, and the skill level required to operate them.

In the "Understanding Room Acoustics" guide, I discussed the importance of making room acoustics functional for an audio system, regardless of the musical culture of your church. The next step to consider before choosing the appropriate equipment is who will be responsible for maintaining and operating the system.

If you serve in a small church (100 seats or less), the required skills to set up and operate the audio system will be less demanding than for a 2,500-seat church. The equipment needed to cover a smaller space is typically much less complex. In a portable church, for instance, you usually need simple connections between a powered mixer and speakers on stands. Larger spaces require systems with more components and control.

Depending on the size and complexity of your system, you need to determine the skill level required by volunteers to operate the system properly. Whether installing a new system or upgrading your existing one, ensure the components you acquire can be operated by techs with minimum training. It may not make sense to purchase gear with cool features and benefits if no one can access them, let alone use them correctly. Consider installing equipment that will be easy to use, assuring a consistently good mix.

ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO VOLUNTEER

Count your blessings if your church has a person who has done sound for a living. If you don't, you will have to recruit volunteers, which can prove tricky. Let's face it: sound consoles are intimidating, whether big or small. So, how do you get people to step up? Here are a few things you can try:

- Make volunteer opportunities clear and accessible

- Offer a simple sign-up

- Conduct a church volunteer interest survey

- Promote your volunteer opportunities

- Make volunteering social

- Assure prospective volunteers that training will be included

You can also set up an "Open House Day" to demystify the sound system. Demonstrate how the system works, identify its components, and explain how straightforward audio mixing can be. Prepare a simple outline of how and what your volunteers will learn. Most importantly, be ready to answer their questions.

TRAINING — WHAT TO THINK ABOUT

Just about anybody with a passion for serving can be trained to manage sound, but keep these points in mind when talking with prospective volunteers:

- Do they have a love for music?

- Do they listen to music often and critically?

- Do they have the willingness to serve?

- Are they dedicated to showing up early and staying late?

Audio system engineering is a science, certainly, but it requires more than just technical acumen — it also requires artistic elements. As a worship leader recruiting for the sound team, I would start by looking for musicians who are not on the platform. I know they love music already — they play it and listen to it. Because of that, they usually find it easier to train in technical skills.

Something to remember: a typical volunteer may be asked to operate the system for just 1-2 hours per week, so it becomes necessary to fill in the gaps between Sundays with practice. The question is, how? Many people are not in church except when mixing, so when and where will they practice?

Developing your prospective sound team member's ear is a great way to start. Listening to and understanding sound can be the most valuable tool in a tech's arsenal — the ability to listen to music critically, de-construct it and tear it apart. Here are some apps and websites that can help:

- Tenuto App
- HearEQ App
- Good-Ear.com

- Quiztones App
- Teoria.com
- EarMaster.com

If potential volunteers can access a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation), they could download free multi-track recordings and practice mixing at home with a small set of monitors or headphones. This type of training translates into applying level changes, altering timber and tone with EQ, and controlling dynamic range with compressors and limiters.

START AT THE BEGINNING

You get a new volunteer! And then, before you know it, they aren't showing up anymore because they don't think they can do it. It turns out that overwhelming new team members is the best way to run them off.

One of the best ways to overwhelm them is this: A tech leader parks a new volunteer behind one of the experienced techs during a service to "observe and learn." The tech may show the trainee a few things — this control does this, that control does that. A week or two later, that volunteer stands at the console alone, hoping everything goes right.

It is essential to tell prospective volunteers that becoming a sound tech will be a process. They shouldn't expect to go from, "Hey, I'd like to learn sound" to solo mixing front-of-house (FOH) in less than six months. It is possible that someone could reach that level in less time if they were on the console every weekend, but most people can't do that. Therefore, it usually takes 6-12 months to get proficient enough to handle a weekend solo without the help of a senior tech.

Audio volunteers should be brought on first as trainees. They'll spend a few months getting to know the mic locker, cable storage system and stage layout, then learn how to set up the stage for each of your worship groups. After they can set the stage by themselves with only the aid of an input sheet, they can move on to learning the mixer. Of course, systems of different sizes will dictate how long a trainee needs to spend time "learning the ropes." For smaller or even portable systems, it may only be a matter of a few services before a volunteer can run solo.

As important as it is to operate the equipment and have a great ear, a good FOH engineer is a servant. FOH can sometimes be viewed as a prestigious position, and putting someone in there too soon could lead them to forget why they are there. Get to know the prospective volunteer as much as you can.

Every person on the sound team needs to know and understand the "signal path." If someone learns how to operate the mixer but doesn't have a solid grasp of how the audio gets there, then when — not if — something goes wrong in the signal chain, they will have no idea how to fix it. Intimately knowing the entire signal path will make it far easier to troubleshoot and resolve the problem.

USE MILESTONES, NOT TIME, TO PROMOTE TRAINEES

Everyone learns at their own pace, and it is important not to force people to go to the next level if they're not ready. It's also important not to hold people back. Some people will learn quickly and move on to the next level sooner. Let them. Holding people back will frustrate them and you.

It's crucial to establish a series of milestones that, once reached, allow the trainee to advance. For example, when someone can set the entire stage by themselves, they can move on to basic training on the console. Some people may get there in a month; others may take six months; either is okay. Remember, this is a long-term investment in your team.

We all must face the truth that some people will not have the skills to become a solo FOH engineer. However, they might make a great assistant or setup/tear-down crew member. They could even mix simple events, like mid-week services or occasional outdoor events that only require a small sound reinforcement. Everyone wins by assigning them an appropriate role — you retain valuable help, and they work at their comfort level.

DON'T TRAIN BEFORE THE SERVICE

Sunday morning is not the best time for training — a lot is at stake in preparing for the service. Every team has deadlines to meet, and if anything goes wrong, it can result in something negative that affects the entire service. Additionally, the FOH engineer has all their attention on the stage; there is no time to talk, answer questions or explain why they are making adjustments.

Arrange training sessions during the week, if possible. If you can, record your services in a DAW and then use those tracks for a virtual mixing class using the exact musicians and singers in your worship band. Suppose you can't record services directly to a DAW. In that case, you can download multi-track recordings from several locations online and use those through a simple DAW on a laptop to practice mixing multiple channels. If you don't have access to multi-tracks, train during worship band rehearsal nights.

Spend as much time as necessary for your volunteers to feel comfortable. Let them ask questions, turn knobs, and move faders to their heart's content without fear of consequence.

Remember, this is a tough position, and it can take up to a year to learn how to mix FOH effectively. Don't rush the process, even though circumstances may push you that way. In the long run, everyone will be better off and better trained.

TRAINING TIPS

Here are some tips for training new volunteers.

- INSTEAD OF SCHEDULING LONG SESSIONS, TRY TRAINING FOR 15 MINUTES BEFORE REHEARSALS and then use the rehearsal to give them hands-on experience. Break the 15 minutes up into three five-minute segments:

  - Five minutes to start building a relationship with them. Get to know them a little — they need to know that you care about them, not just what they can do.

  - Five minutes of focused training on a specific topic. You can show them a training video or teach them yourself, whichever may be more applicable. In other words, don't try to teach them compression and EQ all in the same week; keep it focused.

  - Give them five minutes to create a mixing cheat sheet so that they have something to reference quickly. The cheat sheet should list all the vocals and instruments they will be mixing, with notations for lead vocals and lead instruments for each song in that service. The cheat sheet can be an excellent tool for helping a new volunteer get familiar with all the different vocals and instruments and how the mix will change from song to song.

To help get a new sound volunteer up and running as quickly as possible, here are some topics that can be taught each week:

WEEK 1: Focus on faders to create a good mix using the cheat sheet

WEEK 2: Gain and gain-staging the console

WEEK 3: Low-cut filters

WEEK 4: Mixing monitors with Aux/Bus Mixes

WEEK 5: Setting EQ using frequency sweeping

WEEK 6: Compression for instruments and vocals

WEEK 7: Effects

AFTER YOU TRAIN, BE SURE TO RETAIN VOLUNTEERS

A good way to start is to care for and treat them respectfully. Provide stability, structure and planning. Focus on what motivates them. Listen to their suggestions and concerns. Be ready to encourage and compliment them on work well done. If they feel they are a valued and an important part of the team, you will have a motivated and long-term volunteer.
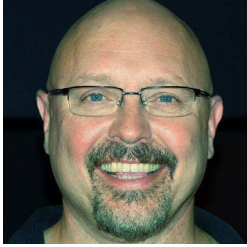
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