The future of 5.1 surround sound

Dec 6, 2005 12:06 PM
Audio Technology Update e-newsletter

With less than half of U.S. homes being surround sound-equipped and only a small, but growing, segment of television programming being delivered in 5.1, what's keeping surround sound from being more widely adopted by both the videographer and broadcaster as well as the home viewers? Audio Technology Update sat down with the inventor of the Holophone H2-PRO 5.1 microphone system to get his take on the state of the surround sound marketplace.

"Surround Sound is growing internationally but its consumer uptake has been slowed considerably due to an over-abundance of surround formats on the market resulting in a lack of consistency of the final product delivered by the broadcasters themselves," said Michael Godfrey, president and founder of Holophone Surround Sound Microphone Systems.

"It seems everybody, from the video creator to the broadcaster, is doing things differently, which always seems to happen when a relatively new technology like 5.1 is still in its infancy. It doesn't always translate well to the final viewer at home," he said. Godfrey said the same phenomenon of slow adoption is happening on the video side as well with multi-sized pictures (4:3, 16:9, Letterbox, etc.).

The cost of producing 5.1-enabled video has also been a factor according to Godfrey. "On the production side of things, new surround content has previously been too costly to produce, unreliable and confusing on a large scale for the organizations who actually create the surround products," he said. "This is evolving as the global stereo infrastructure slowly makes the transition over to surround sound and the equipment prices and simplicity come down to a real world level."

One of the major challenges is the lack of 5.1 television programming. "Sometimes even when I know that a program is supposed to be in 5.1 it comes up in the final broadcast as only 2.0. I've called my local cable company repeatedly on this one. The data is somehow lost in the transmission from the source broadcaster to the local cable company or local broadcaster and ultimately the viewer," said Godfrey. "I think that all of this will sort itself out through the revitalization of the transmission infrastructure over time, as HDTV standardization comes into place around the world."

Despite numbers that have been less than enthusiastically received by those desiring surround sound to succeed, Godfrey has an evenhanded, positive but patient outlook. "We are making some excellent progress in bringing this new medium to the people and certainly more has been made in the past. Once consumers get a taste of really well produced and delivered surround sound, as opposed to stereo, the difference in audio quality is as noticeable as the difference between black and white and color television."

For more information, visit www.holophone.com.