Bob Marcus, RGB Spectrum

Staying one step ahead of the AV competition

RGB Spectrum is leading a renaissance in visual information management. The company's CEO talks to **Llanor Alleyne** about the industry evolutions that keep innovation at the top of its priorities

How did you come to be working in the visual display technology business?
Many years ago I had an assignment as a consultant with a company that produced high-end computer graphics, and through that experience a number of things were set into motion. First of all, they were looking for a device they couldn't find on the market – what we now call a video scan converter. When my involvement with the company was over, I decided to build the device they couldn't buy: I started this company to build video scan converters. Once the computer was established we decided on a number of follow-up products. That's how RGB got off the ground as an audiovisual company.

RGB Spectrum was founded in 1987. What are the most significant changes that have taken place in the industry during the company's lifetime?
There have certainly been a lot of changes in the past 20-odd years. One we have monitored, and in some respects helped to foster, is a movement towards more elegant and sophisticated forms of displaying complex information. Twenty years ago, the general display paradigm was built around sources of information tied to dedicated displays. The displays would be in a fixed position and, of course, a fixed size. A better solution, though still rudimentary, was to add a switcher to give a little flexibility. But what we have seen develop is far more useful – an ability to treat all the displays in a room as 'display real estate' that can be managed creatively.

One of the notable advances we introduced to the industry is the multiviewer, where you could set up your display to show multiple images in windows like you do on a computer. The difference is we were able to do it using different signal sources. For example, we could have four computers sharing a single screen, and each of those images could be scaled and positioned. So on that screen you can see an array of information from different sources arranged and sized according to importance. The other thing you could do is juxtapose images that you wanted to compare. That's important because often you are looking for temporal or spatial differences.

Then came the display wall, made up of an array of display devices, the big brother to the multiviewer, where you could do something similar but on a larger scale. If you run a wall well you can display information in the most meaningful way and aid the decision-making process.

What do you see as RGB Spectrum's unique selling proposition today?
There is an interesting development in progress – the merger of AV and IT technology. Together, they form a powerful decision support system. What we are doing is devising a set of tools and products to provide a sophisticated KVM (keyboard, video and mouse) system as part of the AV system.

We are interested in group decision-making environments that provide operators with the ability to share and control information sources, including computers. That is not something that is typically done in KVM systems, which are by-and-large oriented towards controlling server farms, and tend not to address interactivity among operators and other issues. We've come up with a system we call Multipoint KVM, which we think is the most advanced decision-making support system in the world. It is designed specifically for control room environments. It allows a number of operators to share resources and provides a system of permissions and priorities that determine who has access to what information – both to see and to manipulate. It allows for peer-to-peer interaction as well as supervisory control.

RGB Spectrum covers a number of different application sectors. Where are you seeing the strongest growth?
The two sectors that are growing most strongly for us are display walls and switchers. One of the things that we are doing is providing a higher level of vertical integration by combining products into systems. For example, our KVM system combines our display wall technology, multiviewers, and switchers; it ties them together with this application to provide a stronger value proposition. We are combining products into systems so that the total is more than the sum of the parts. We are making it easier for system integrators by providing them with products they can mix-and-match to create the appropriate solution for their customer.

How does the European market for your products differ from the US market? Do you address the European market differently as a result?
We service a variety of markets. On a country-by-country basis we find differences, but it's not tremendous. When we go overseas we have to deal with the fact that not all of our customers are English speaking. Beginning in 2011, we are going to provide more localisation. We will accept orders in euros and pounds sterling as well as providing local inventory to deliver products more quickly.

How big an issue has HDCP compliance been for you?
We are one of the leading providers of HDCP-compliant products. This year, we were the first company to provide a wall display processor that is multi-output and HDCP compliant. We are also one of the few companies that has introduced fully HDCP-compliant switchers. At this juncture, every model of MediaWall that we sell is HDCP compliant. We also make HDCP-compliant multiviewers.

What other technology challenges are you helping customers with at the moment?
The integration of IT and AV products is a challenge. When you deal with different capabilities, interfaces and vendors, there can be challenges. We are trying to provide solutions that will allow for very simple and elegant interoperability between our own products, and those of others, and then tie them into applications such as KVM so that we can provide a single-vendor solution to an entire control room or other venue.

'We are combining products into systems so that the total is more than the sum of the parts'

Would you like to make any predictions about the industry or the company in, say, five years' time?
We've noticed a significant improvement in the sophistication of audiovisual environments, especially in areas such as security. People are realising that a proper AV system is a great aid to decision making. In the US in particular, we discovered after 9/11 that the number of people in the security industry buying our equipment went way up. Even though it is a price-sensitive industry, we found that people were more willing to spend more money because they realised the advantages that a sophisticated system would bring to the decision-making process. They are demanding more capability than they previously did. That bodes well for the AV industry. IE

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Bob Marcus – a brief biography

- **Bob Marcus studied at Colombia University and MIT before spending the first 10 years of his career in international business, including residencies in Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia**
- **His first job was with Exxon before moving to progressively smaller companies and finally becoming founder or co-founder of three companies**
- **In 1987 he founded RGB Spectrum**