



Screen Time

ABC Warehouse uses its local angle to get big stadium and arena sales

by JOHN MORRELL

To say Dan Schuh was busy last year is an understatement. As executive director of TV and audiovisual products for Michigan-based ABC Warehouse, a 42-store chain of appliance and electronics stores, Schuh is responsible for contract sales, working mainly with hotels, restaurants and other commercial facilities in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio.

But in December 2016 his workload significantly increased. ABC Warehouse was selected as the main supplier of video screens for Little Caesars Arena, a new 20,000-seat home for Detroit's Pistons and Red Wings; Schuh was put in charge of delivering more than 1,600 screens of various sizes.

"It was quite a project, considering most of our contract sales dealt with 10 to 20 screens for a local business," he says. "For this one we knew we had to up our game, by a lot."

ABC partnered with LG Electronics

for the job and began working with the building's designer and installer on what was needed. Screens were ordered in sizes that ranged from 32 to 98 inches. Some had to be regular monitors while others needed touchscreen capabilities. And they had to provide a 4K high-definition display experience in a variety of settings around the arena, from the concourse, suites and restaurants to offices and locker rooms.

"In these types of settings we use commercial products, which are different from the standard retail screens," says Evan Peterson, enterprise account manager for LG Commercial. "In many of the applications at Little Caesars, we had to create video walls out of a group of monitors that required units with an ultra-thin bezel."

Another factor that commercial customers look for is how light reacts to a screen. "Our displays are designed

to accommodate people seeing images at different angles and while they're walking," says Clark Brown, vice president of sales for LG Commercial. "You want the best off-angle viewing capacity for the monitor, so that they have a clear view of the game while they're going to get a drink."

And as consumers buy TVs with higher resolution for their homes, they're also expecting the same viewing experience when they're at a game. "If guests check out a screen and see that it's a little fuzzy or the color is off, they're not going to like it," Brown says. "They know they get a better view at home."

EMPHASIZING SERVICE

The parties involved in the video screen project got together several times early in the year to discuss what was needed and when. It was generally made up of groups of executives and technicians from LG

Commercial, the designer, the company doing the installation and Schuh, the lone representative of ABC.

"I'm used to running a one-man department," Schuh says. "As a relatively small, family-owned retailer we all wear different hats and we're used to being light on the management side. When I go to Asia and meet with manufacturers, they often expect us to send a big group of marketing and operations people. They think it's kind of funny when I'm the only guy who shows up."

This kind of pared-down management style has helped ABC fare the wild economic storms in electronics during the last 20 years. Founded outside of Detroit in 1963 by the Hartunian family, the company has outlasted Goliaths of the past including Circuit City. With annual sales of \$375 million and more than 1,800 employees, they've also survived competition from internet sales by emphasizing old-fashioned service.

"When I'm out and people learn who I work for, it seems nearly everyone says they bought a product from ABC Warehouse," Schuh says. "And what's interesting is they usually remember the name of their salesperson."

Being a one-man band in the Little Caesar's project worked for Schuh since he had helped the company develop a "turn on a dime" philosophy. "When you're lacking a big management bureaucracy, it cuts down on the politics and makes it easier to get everyone on the same page," he says. "Our thinking is 'just get the job done as smoothly as possible.'"

Schuh believes this also played into their selection for the project. "Here in Michigan and the upper Midwest there's a strong 'buy local' ethos and the arena's ownership wanted to keep that going by picking our business, which people are familiar with."

WORKING THROUGH BUMPS

As the project moved along, Schuh and the LG team had to rely on flexibility to keep up with the orders. They also counted on each other. "There were long stretches over the summer when I was having longer conversations with Dan than with my wife," Peterson says. "With



an early September opening for a Kid Rock concert, we got to know each other well in the process. It helped us get past any bumps in the road."

The "bumps" included orders from the contractor that needed to be quickly changed. "We would be working with the factory and warehouses because the contractor needed 150 49-inch screens by next Thursday," Schuh says.

"We'd almost get those lined up and then a call would come in saying, 'Can you make those 55-inch screens? And can we get them by Tuesday?' So there was a lot of adjusting on the fly, which is what you'd expect on a project of this size."

"The people at LG warehouses around the world got to know us very well," Peterson says. "Clark spent hours on the phone at all hours because of the international time differences finding products."

In the midst of the Little Caesar's project came a twist: Detroit's Ford Field wanted ABC Warehouse to supply more than 500 Sony screens for their renovation, by the same time as the arena job, before the Detroit Lions' first game of the season in August.

"When it happened we were very happy for all the new business," Schuh says. "We didn't really have time to think, 'How are we going to get all this done?' We just dug in and did it."

The Ford Field project was a bit easier to manage, he says, because instead of trying to figure out where multiple

screens should be used it involved mostly replacing older units. "They wanted to maintain a similar design, but they wanted the newer 4K technology."

PROMOTIONAL ASPECTS

Working on both meant a great deal of juggling from one project to another, which could have led to some confusion.

"It made things a little chaotic but also fun," Schuh says. "What helped is that they were both ordering from different brands, which made it easier to keep things straight."

Ford Field's renovation included a massive rethinking of its sound system and upgrades to its video boards. The ownership wanted to include Sony's latest Triluminos and X-Reality screens in sizes from 49 to 75 inches for the stadium's suites and public areas, which created some extra effort for Schuh.

"Ford Field was going to be one of the first customers for these products and that meant we had to work hard with Sony to get some units here early for testing and then get the large order here on time," Schuh says. "It all came together though, which reflected on our experience."

Another benefit for ABC Warehouse is a marketing arrangement where the company can promote its work with both facilities. Signage and pre- and post-game messaging at the arena and stadium also points out ABC Warehouse as the official video supplier.

By opening night at both Little Caesar's and Ford Field, all screens were in place and operating and Schuh could finally relax — but a vacation would have to wait.

"I was ready for some time off but by the fall we're gearing up for holiday sales so I had to shift gears and keep going," he says. "But in the spring, that's when you'll have to search for me somewhere. That is, unless there's another new stadium in the works." **STORES**

John Morell is a Los Angeles-based writer who has covered retail and business topics for a number of publications around the world.