Radio on the Road
Defining the Challenge

by Mark Shander

[March 2012] The goal of our Radio on the Road *series is to highlight some of the variety of ways new technologies have changed the traditional "Remote" broadcast. Mark Shander not only suggests looking at new ways to use the gear we have, but to consider some gear that might not have attracted your attention.*

We are digging into the meat of remote reporting, live remotes and remote broadcasting (as well as audio production in general with a look at micro-studios).

Recently, quite a few of potentially-competitive quality gear targeting musicians and consumers have hit the market. Some budget-conscious solutions use professional broadcast equipment, including codecs. Others use consumer gear and solutions like Skype or other Internet communications software.

Naturally, broadcasters have looked at the potential to save a few dollars of budgetary spend by using these solutions. Of course, some of the factors that require careful consideration include durability over time, support from the manufacturer, and signal quality monitoring.

MONITORING FRUSTRATIONS

For example, some of our readers have shared their frustrations with the common implementations of audio signal monitoring.

While quite a few USB microphones and Internet broadcasting hardware now feature an audio circuit loop for real-time monitoring of the audio signal, sometimes that signal is an E-E loop from output of the device back into a monitoring jack on the microphone itself, not the microphone-level output of a pre-amp we would prefer. Actually, a simulation of a "play" head on a tape machine is another commonly-available feature, but it is software based and sometimes device specific.

Another commonly shared challenge with micro-studio gear available for consideration is sometimes related to electronic metering for monitoring.

Many times the recording levels are set once using a "give me a level" test then are never tweaked during the recording process. Other times there is no level control at all, with an

AGC that compresses more than just signal peaks – it just squashes dynamic range and compromises quality.

Then there are solutions that offer single-LED monitoring, with a presence/peak LED. That encourages you to turn the gain pot down below clipping and hope peaks just do not happen, because they are never compensated for during recording if they do occur.

CONSIDERING THE ALTERNATIVES

Since this series is encouraging folks to consider alternatives, we want to start by looking at some of the consumer gear on the market and make sure they are suitable. The reason is that some companies consider broadcasting to be too small a market and provide little or no support to broadcasters.

That is why we will be eliminating from consideration coverage of companies that produce not so much consumer-grade but consumer-targeted equipment and cannot – or refuse to – assist us in reviewing their products. The idea is they probably would not be responsive to your needs either. (For instance, one colorful company with a past history of producing exceptional broadcast microphones committed to provide product and support. Yet only after causing publication delays and missed deadlines, did they announce a new consumer-oriented focus at the expense of broadcasters. This left us with the perception that we now will take a back-seat to the needs of mass-markets.)

Also, we eliminated a popular smaller broadcast equipment manufacturer from consideration because of a request that we deemed to be unreasonable and potentially bordered on being inappropriate – we will not guarantee anyone a review on their terms. That does you, the reader, no good.

A PLACE TO START

With all that in mind, a good place to start might be with IKMultimedia.

IKMultimedia manufactures and distributes products for musicians that could definitely be considered very usable for a micro-studio for broadcasters. The hardware/software solutions integrate to provide very unique capabilities that provide some differentiated solutions in this cost/performance category.

They have two products that are voice-acquisition-related to consider, as well as a 1/4" guitar/instrument interface that lets you acquire audio from musicians on the road.

IKMultimedia's flagship product, iRig Microphone, is available at many consumer electronic retailers, including Radio Shack. And their newest audio voice recording product is a small mono electret-condensor microphone. Both of these products are focused on iOS (Apple) devices.

In our next edition of *Radio on the Road*, we will review iRig Microphone, and the free and paid versions of software from IKMultimedia that turns iPads and iPhones in micro-studios with multiple Internet-delivered audio distribution options.

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Mark Shander, a computer show host and syndicator, is based in Phoenix, AZ. You can contact him at mark@shander.com

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