TEACHING AND TECHNOLOGY

Creating Lasting Presentation Spaces

by Katie Stallcup

Whether building a lecture hall or a performance hall, campus planners must be both thorough and thoughtful in order to produce a successful presentation space which makes the best use of resources. This article covers conversations with several professionals in the field—including acoustic engineers, audio-visual project managers, and system designers—to find out how planners can prevent expensive mistakes and create the presentation space an institution needs.

Ask the Professionals

Here is the one often-repeated recommendation among the field experts: Budget the money to consult professionals if the institution can afford the expense. Each expert strongly recommends hiring an architectural engineer (AE) or an integrator with extensive experience in all aspects of audio-visual (AV) and presentation design to plan the project. Spending the money up front means saving money that would likely be spent making changes once the project has started.

If contracting a professional to create the design is simply not an option and planners decide to design the space themselves, planners should at the very least pay an AE or integrator to review the design before moving forward with the project. These professionals will likely catch potentially costly mistakes or aspects that had not been considered, such as issues with accessibility. Consulting with a professional to review the design will save the institution time, resources, and headaches.

Know the Goal

Perhaps the most important thing to do when choosing technology for a new presentation space is to be certain what functions the equipment needs to perform, down to the details. Planners should consider questions such as these: Does the space need a particular panel to control a specific motorized screen and projector? What about controlling the instructor's volume from the same panel? Establishing the space's needs, control interface preferences, and how everything needs to interact is much less costly—and easier—when done before purchasing equipment and programming control functions.

"When you're talking about a presentation space, whether it's a lecture hall or a theater or a performing arts center, you have to assume at some point these spaces are going to be multi-use," says Bobby Hendricks, senior project manager and senior audio engineer at Quantum Technologies, Inc., a parent company of Hear Technologies. "So, what you have to decide is,

what is the use going to be 75% of the time? For example, if the space is going to be a performance space for orchestras, an open, reflective sound is considered a plus. You want the room to be a natural amplifier. And then you make acoustic design decisions based on what you think the primary use is going to be."

After considering those decisions, planners should examine what the secondary use is likely to be. If that orchestra-centered space will occasionally serve as a lecture hall, then the space is going to need some absorption and acoustic treatment to control the sound and increase intelligibility. "But I can't go too far with that," Hendricks says. "If the room is too treated and you do have musical performances, it's not going to be appropriate." To balance those needs, a designer might include extra audio inputs, electrical infrastructure, and other technology that would allow for the less typical use but still serve the primary use.

A similar approach is ensuring that the space and the surrounding areas have the infrastructure required to do everything that may be desired, not just now, but also down the road. "The decisions that you make about your infrastructure are far-reaching and potentially the most expensive mistakes," Hendricks says. Changing the design's plan or functions halfway through or after a project is completed may necessitate changing infrastructure, which can be extraordinarily costly. For example, if planners decide to add a video screen in the lobby two years after completing the project, having existing conduit in place for wiring will be much cheaper than pulling out sheetrock to run wire. So, ensuring that the number and location of electrical circuits, conduit wire paths, and structural support for heavy objects—such as speakers and motorized screens—serves the current and future purposes of the space will go a long way toward ongoing success.

Think Outside the Lecture Hall

Recent pandemic restrictions have taught planners to be creative in all aspects of campus life, including presentation spaces. Any

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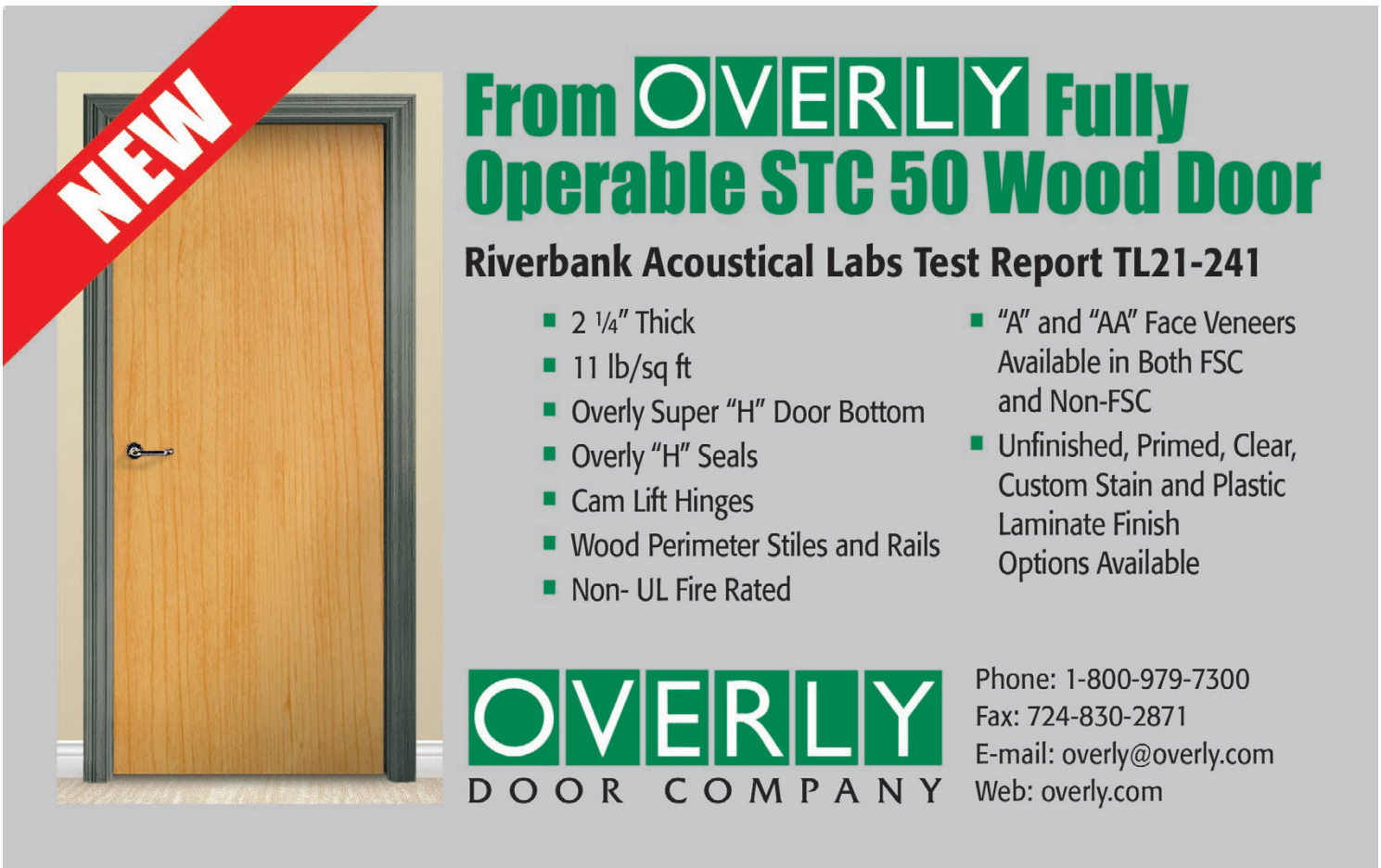

flexibility built into a design is an advantage, for now and for the future. Design engineers recommend ensuring that the plan includes more than enough bandwidth to account for future technologies. Adding cameras and microphones that could be useful for streaming is a good strategy, too, even if the current use does not rely on streaming. Again, extra electrical and support infrastructure will provide for future technologies and functions.

In Covid times and for the future, campuses need to think about how to make a classroom or performance space accessible to students and participants who can't be there in person, says David Long, a QTI system design engineer who has worked as technology project manager at multiple colleges. Such design decisions mean thinking from the remote-attendee's point of view: they will need to be able to see and hear not only the speaker, but also the audience's questions and reactions. The goal is to replicate the environment as much as possible for remote attendees, which might include budgeting for video switchers for streaming events and adding camera and microphone considerations.

"How's it going to look?" Long asks. "Are you dealing with ambient lighting? Are you going to have to color correct for florescent lighting? The whole point is to make it like the remote end is actually there, and the less distraction you have from a technology standpoint, the better."

Be Future-Ready

In addition to preparing for the future by considering remote participation, accounting for generous infrastructure, and allowing for plenty of growth, planners should take a look at emerging technologies and where they might fit in the presentation or performance space. While no one has a crystal ball, examining trends in the AV and tech world can be a step toward future-proofing the space. For example, emerging technologies are increasingly network-based, so having an extensive network of Cat6 ethernet cable in place—even if those elements are not currently in use—is a safe bet.

Much of technology development today is being driven by gaming, says QTI's Hendricks. Multichannel audio, full immersion video, and virtual reality are breaking out of the gaming sphere and into art spaces. A good chance exists that some of those capabilities will eventually be expected in presentation and performance spaces, too. The goal is not tech for tech's sake but for audience participation. "The expectation is going to be they can participate in some manner," Hendricks says. "The day of being just a spectator is nearly gone. The expectation of 19- to 22-year-olds is that nobody just watches. It's 'we're part of this.' So, if you're building something, you're building it for the future."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Katie Stallcup enjoys being part of a team of audio geeks as marketing and sales for Hear Technologies, a pro audio manufacturer focusing on personal monitoring systems. Find more about Hear Technologies and their innovative, user-focused pro audio products at HearTechnologies.com.

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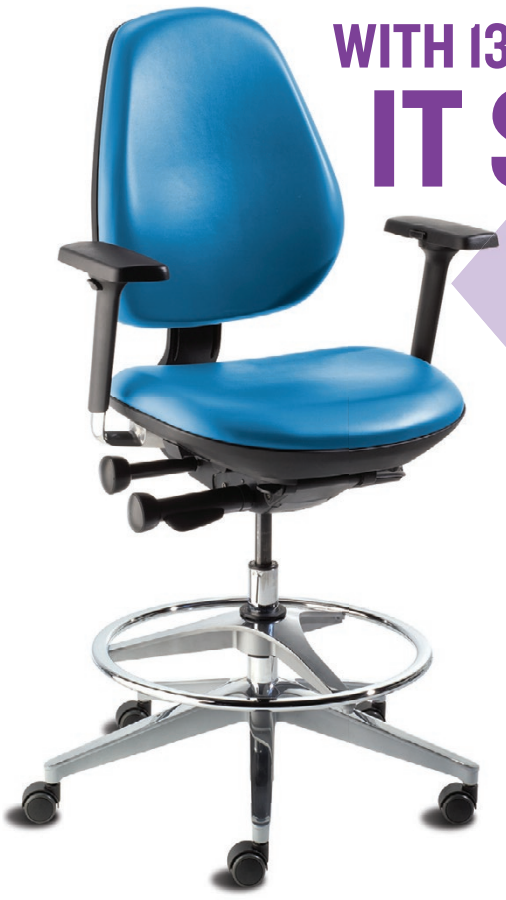

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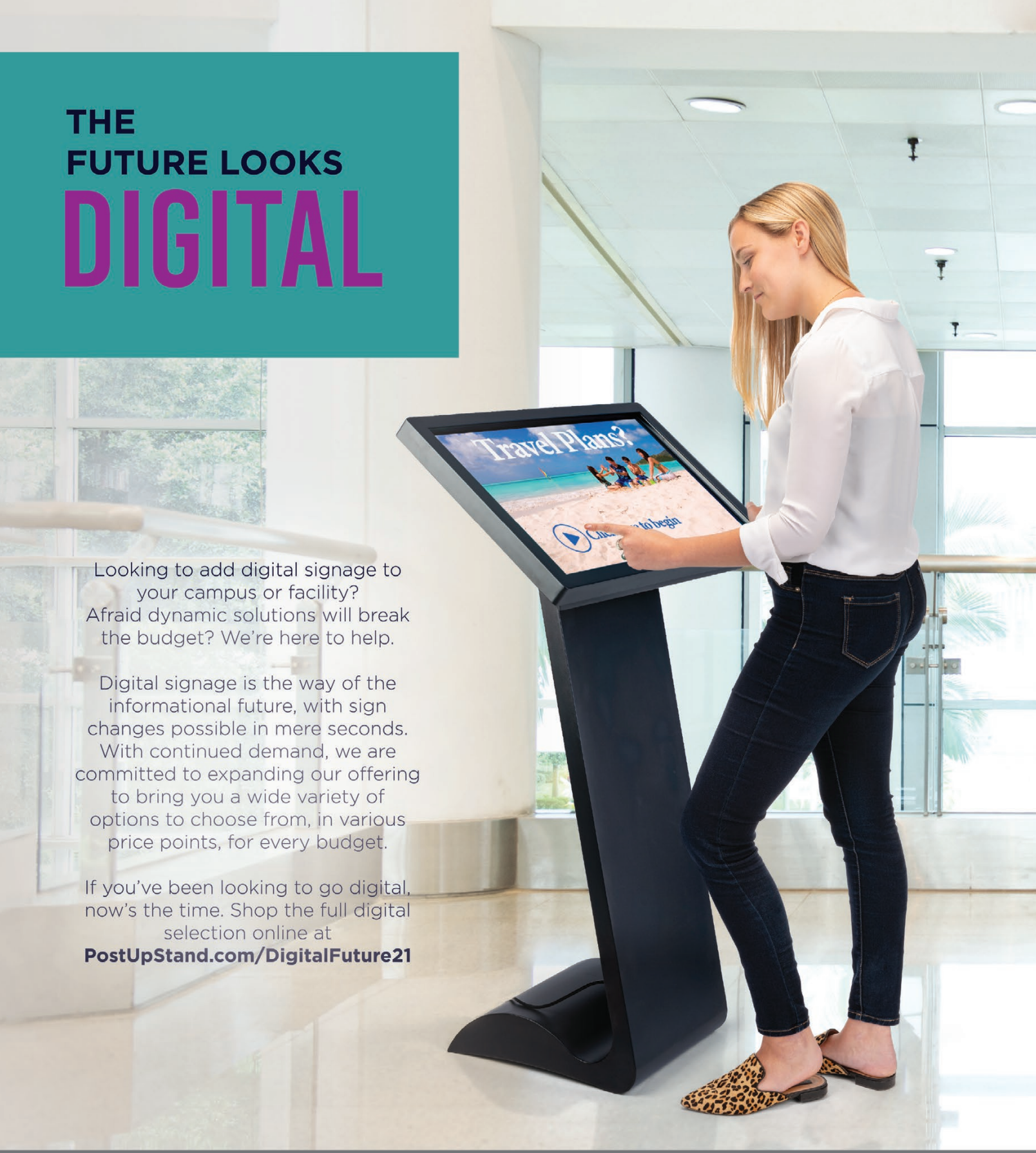

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