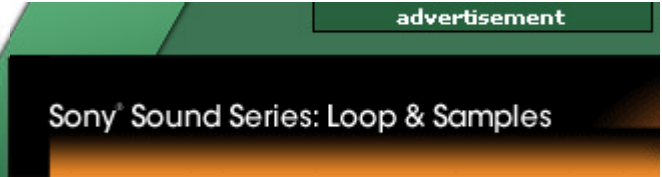




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Magic bus

Sharing information for mobile command center

Aug 1, 2003
by Rob Seitz

The amount of misinformation reported as fact by the media during and immediately after 9/11 deeply disturbed Shawn Stafford.

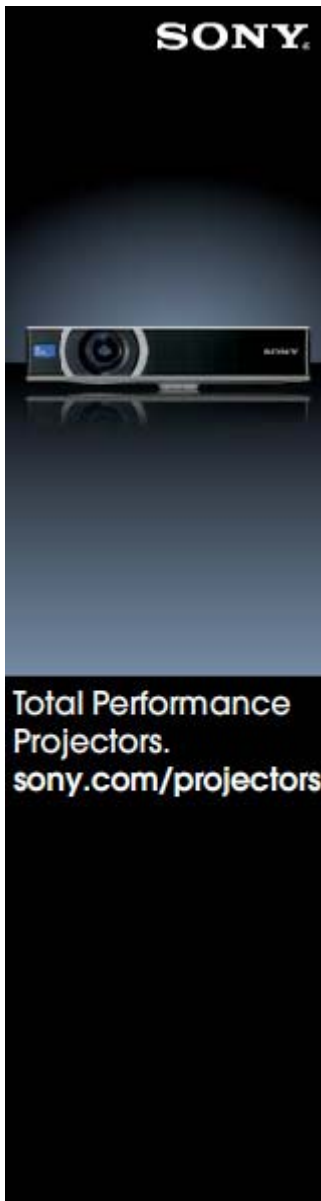
As the city of Clearwater's supervisor of television production for its Public Communications Department, Stafford recognizes the importance of giving out information as accurate as possible, whatever the situation. He had a grand plan in mind. Something so far out he is unaware of any U.S. city with the kind of vehicular law enforcement resource he proposed.

What kind of idea was percolating in his head? Think big, and then kick it up a notch, as a nationally syndicated chef often says.

Yes, Even The Kitchen Sink

After covering every angle, Stafford was able to convince city officials in this progressive-thinking southwest Florida municipality that they needed a mobile command center to better





handle law enforcement situations and potential disasters such as chemical leaks, hurricanes, and tornadoes.

But not just any run-of-the-mill mobile command center. Stafford's idea was to build a bus like no other.

A bus on steroids, a technological Godzilla on six tires.

In early January, armed with a \$750,000 grant, Stafford and a consultant from Teklink Computer and Video Systems in nearby Largo, FL, purchased a cadre of sophisticated state-of-the-art equipment to convert a Blue Bird bus into a police station on wheels. When accompanied with its air conditioning trailer, the bus is 65 feet long. It sleeps two, and includes a shower, bathroom, and kitchen.

"It was troublesome how much different information was coming out after 9/11," Stafford told Government Video. "It was difficult to tell what was fact and what was fiction. What got me thinking was that I wanted our bus to serve our communities as a one-stop spot for the media. This will be the place the media gets its facts — and the community will not be getting bombarded with a lot of misinformation.

"Our thinking going into this project was to build a command center that could be mobilized for any type of emergency," he continued. "Once we get to the location of the problem we can set up the command center, run the investigation from the site, then deal with the media. With our bus, we can feed any source that the media needs — satellite trucks, news trucks, anyone who needs audio and video. It's that versatile."

Ready For Action

The bus has a complete radio command center, with two fire department and four police department radios installed. It also includes a network, server, fax machine, and an eight-line cellular phone system. The bus has DirecTV satellite reception system for DSS, plus MATV for any local station pickup.



Outside, the bus has NEC plasma monitors that are configured to display video or computer sources using a Pro AV 1600 scan converter from FOCUS Enhancements. It also sports a full surveillance camera system (one regular and one infrared camera on 50-foot stealth masts), which are routable to seven monitors in the front office area.

"The stealth technology is similar to the ones the border patrols use to see color at night," Stafford said. "Plus, we have a heck of a lighting system, so we're good to go 24/7."

Oh yes, and the bus has a three-camera broadcast facility in the rear. "It's like a small but complete studio on the bus," Stafford said. "It is so time efficient to have everything you need all on the bus. If we would have to go back to City Hall to put together everything we shot out in the field it would quadruple our time."

The system features Sony DSR-370 and DXC-327 cameras on Miller tripods connected by a Telemetrics coax control system. Talent can use wired or wireless Sennheiser Evolution Series mics, and the studio gear can be used for exterior shots with a Full-Spectrum Pepper Pak lighting kit from LTM.

The on-board control room includes an ECHOLab 2500 switcher, FOR-A MF-310 DVE, Pinnacle Deko 100 CG, Mackie CR-1604 VLZ audio board, Videotek test and measurement gear, and LCD monitors from Marshall Electronics and ViewSonic. The system also features a Clear-Com IFB and Telex wireless system, as well as live phone call capability using a Telos system.



Additional video gear includes a Canopus DV Rex NLE system and a dub facility with Panasonic DVCPRO and Sony Beta SP VTRs (as well as VHS decks). The video system is built around a Quartz 64x64 video and audio router, with access panels throughout the bus.

"I've been an engineer for many remote productions over the years, but never for one in a bus," said Teklink president Larry Nadler, who designed the bus, handled the installation integration, and now has a yearlong contract to maintain the equipment. "There was no rear access so all the equipment had to be installed from the front. It was quite a project, but they now have themselves a full-blown police station on wheels."

More Than Emergencies

The bus is spending some 50-plus hours a week out in the community and outlying counties, as Stafford's people show off the pride of the Clearwater Police Department.

"We use the bus in the community to promote the city," he said. "We were in Lakeland for a mock disaster exercise and we hooked up to a satellite truck. The video we shot we sent to the state EOC [Emergency Operations Center] in Tallahassee. There, first responders looked at the video to determine what actions would be appropriate to take based on the video. That was pretty cool."

Florida Governor Jeb Bush was in the Clearwater area in March and the bus was brought out to be used as a staging area for him. "We take it to so many large events, it's probably one of the best PR resources we have out there," Stafford said. "There's so many practical uses for the bus, it will pay for itself ultimately. With all its possibilities, it makes my job fun."

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