MasterFormat: What Has Changed—Or Not

The cascading effect.

By Randal A. Lemke, PhD

When the Construction Specifications Institute (CSI) introduced the most recent version of MasterFormat (MF) in 2004, the AV industry braced for a move to the new version's format that doubled the number of divisions from the 1995 version but also gave AV equipment a more distinct placement.

Five years later, we are still waiting for the seismic shift that has not happened. What the industry is experiencing is a sluggish adoption rate to the 2004 format influenced by several factors, including the slow conversion rate by the architectural community, as well as state governments like Massachusetts that are just now converting their specifications.

Timothy Cape, CTS-D and Principal Consultant for Technitect, LLC, and chair of InfoComm's Independent Consultants in Audiovisual Technology (ICAT) Council, confirmed that "MasterFormat 2004 is in the slow process of adoption. People expected that it would be an immediate change or that no one would convert to it at all; neither situation is true. Architects sometimes contract out the work to specification writers and it takes time to convert a large collection of 1995 specifications to the 2004 format."

AV consultants must also convert specifications from MF95 to MF04, which means changing section numbers and references, a process that is tedious but not overwhelming.

The cascading effect is that, because many AV projects are driven by the architectural community, a large portion of consultants and integrators are still operating under the 16-division format of MF95, where AV is often scattered among several different divisions. (MF04's Division 27 was created for communications systems and is most commonly where AV systems are placed.) It is also important to note that another large portion of the AV community, such as those who concentrate their efforts on design/build projects, rarely interacts with MasterFormat.

The concept of MasterFormat—organizing and presenting project information in a uniform fashion—is a good one. For decades, MasterFormat has provided the building and construction industry with the means to unitize and compartmentalize building trades on large commercial and industrial projects. However, it also accentuates the major difference between AV and other trades in the areas of boilerplate or template specifications. The use of template specifications is common in the building industry, but it cannot—and should not—be applied to AV as a whole.

Joseph Thomas, former AV consultant and current Senior Design Engineer with AVI-SPL, stated that "MasterFormat is a tool that people use in different ways. Depending on the user, the benefit and drawback with MasterFormat is the use of "boilerplate" specifications that are marginally edited from project to project. MasterFormat is good because it helps to limit scope gaps or overlaps and defines divisions of labor. The AV industry should advocate MasterFormat because it drives uniformity, quality, fairness and continuity, and it helps the project team know how to proceed legally. But that's as much as MasterFormat will help the AV industry."

MasterFormat does not take the place of educating other building trades about what we do, a point that often is lost in the MasterFormat discussion. It is not a relationship-building tool, nor is it an educational or innovation tool. AV practitioners must still spend the time and the outreach effort to architects and general contractors with the message of how AV fits into a project specification, whether AV is written up in Division 11 as a specialty system, MF95 Division 16 as a low-voltage line item, the rogue Division 17 sometimes added to MF95 or in MF04 Division 27 as a communications system. As we all know, the AV system on a large project can and does encompass these and other sections throughout a building specification.

As AVI-SPL's Thomas pointed out, the drawings and specifications comprise a contract between, and only between, the Architect and the General Contractor (GC) for any given project. It is the general contractor who determines how the various divisions are awarded to subcontractors. "The architect defines the project in MasterFormat and the GC executes it. The only difference between MF95 and MF04 is the number of divisions. Nothing in the new version prevents an architect from putting AV in any division that makes sense from his perspective, even though it may not make sense to us."

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POV: DA-LITE PURSUES TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

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WL: There are many benefits to wide viewing angles, especially with the different types of audiences being served. Different applications require different types of screens, and one that I mentioned earlier, which continues to be used more frequently, is edge blending. If you're doing front-projection or rear-projection edge blending, you need a screen with extremely wide viewing angles so the audience can see the blended image properly. If you have a screen with narrow viewing angles, you'll see light spots and dark spots across the screen. Screen materials such as Da-Lite's Ultra Wide Angle, which is a new rear-projection screen material with very wide viewing angles, will allow you to see a consistent image all the way across from left to right and top to bottom.

S&C: **What does Da-Lite have in the pipeline right now?**

WL: We're busy completing the JKP Affinity screen series. It's actually going to end up being several different projection screen materials, one of which is in the market now, and a couple of others are in the R&D phase. We'll also continue to work to keep up with the demand here in the US as well as in Europe. But, I think the best answer is for folks to come to booths #4401 and #4123, as well as Demo Room #W203C, at InfoComm to see the latest and greatest.■

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So, although the creation of Division 27 in MF04 does separate out communications systems, it is not for AV alone. Technitect's Cape noted that Division 27 also includes telecom and low voltage, and some people also include some architecturally integrated AV components such as projector mounts in this division, while projection screens are still placed in Division 11. "The introduction of MF04 hasn't affected AV as much or as fast as we originally thought because there is still a wide diversity in specifications. But because of hierarchy in the MF04 structure, there are more areas of coordination and AV integrators have to be more aware of what's happening in other sections," he added.

MasterFormat is an organizational tool for the building, design and construction industry to which commercial AV belongs, so we must react and interact as our clients do. However, MasterFormat is not the panacea to address how the AV industry needs to consistently manage and present system information.

For more information, go to www.infocomm.org. ■