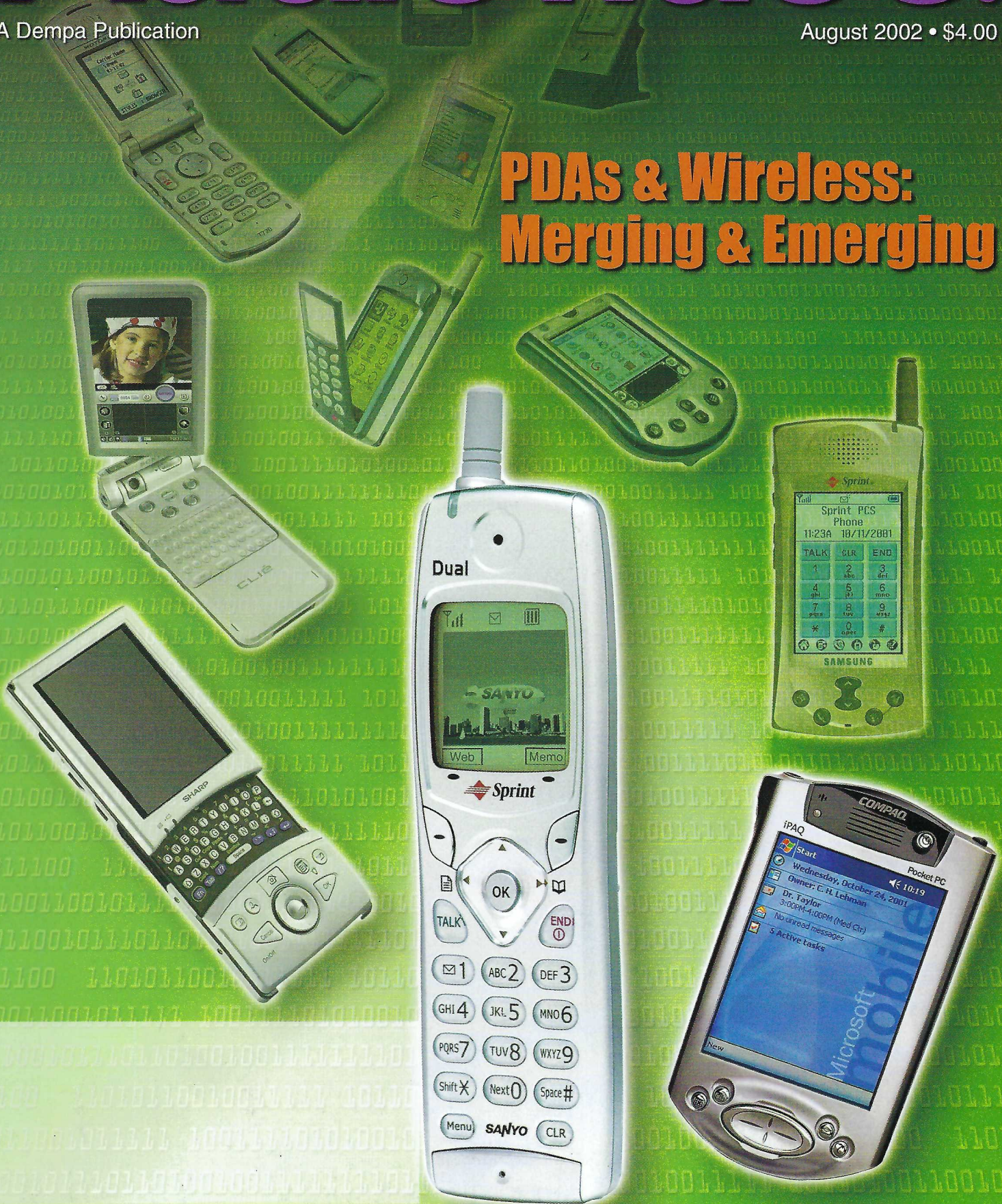


# AudioVideo<sup>®</sup> INTERNATIONAL

A Dempa Publication

August 2002 • \$4.00

## PDA's & Wireless: Merging & Emerging







# SCHOOLING INSTALLERS

**WHAT IS THE VALUE OF 12-VOLT EDUCATION? BY MICAH SHEVELOFF**

**I**n order to address concerns about installation standards in the aftermarket mobile electronics industry, discussions about educational curriculum and installer certification have led to the birth of several specialized schools. Prospective installers can choose from numerous programs scattered across the U.S.; however, the curriculum has not been standardized, and retailers have had varying degrees of success hiring candidates from this new pool of graduates.

"I would like to survey the schools and see where all of these installers end up," pondered Robert Graham, president of Breakers Mobile Electronics in Oxnard, CA. "I have never had the opportunity to employ a graduate of any of the programs," he added. "The guys that I hire have to be trained, and work alongside an experienced installer for 90 days, before going off on their own. It has a disastrous impact on productivity, but the training is necessary. I certainly see the value in being able to hire a qualified entry-level tech," Graham stated.

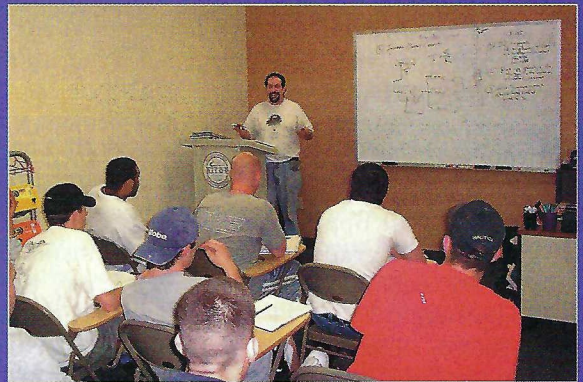
"I want my graduates to be able to walk into a shop and take a job away from a less-qualified candidate," explained Joe Boston, director of the RITOP School for Mobile Electronics, a for-profit

venture based in Watertown, MA. "The concept is to improve upon the industry standards for installation. Along with the curriculum and hands-on experience we give our students, we also emphasize the importance of taking pride in their work," said Boston. "A greater number of independent retailers have expressed their need to be able to

hire an installer with some degree of education, so that they don't have to dedicate so much time and effort to the training process. Sure, they can install a radio in most cars, but do they understand a basic relay or Ohm's law?" Boston indicated that a graduate should expect to garner a starting salary, as an entry-level technician, of \$10 to \$13 per hour.

## **MINIMAL TRAINING, MAXIMUM RESULTS**

Mark Bornemann, director of human resources at LoJack Corp., has hired technicians from the graduating class at RITOP. "These people are typically MECP-certified, so the additional training that we have to do after we hire them is minimal," explained Bornemann. "They just have to become com-



**RITOP CLASSROOM INSTRUCTOR  
PETER A. FACCENDA, IN THE THROES OF  
AN INSTALLATION LECTURE**

fortable with the LoJack way," he added. "If students are paying tuition to attend a school like RITOP, the chances are that they are committed to the industry. Once they have graduated, I know that I am hiring someone who has put in the time and effort to get through a challenging program," said Bornemann. LoJack is a stolen-vehicle-recovery network, and it is the technician's job to go out on the road and install the hardware once it has been sold to the end-user. "The techs are supplied a company vehicle for working hours, and there is no supervisor looking over their shoulder. Candidates for the tech position must demonstrate a high level of responsibility. They are in constant communication with our dispatcher, coordinating their assignments





as the workday progresses,” continued Bornemann. LoJack is tough about quality control as well, sending experienced personnel out into the field to examine completed installations at random. “We do this more frequently for our new hires,” said Bornemann. LoJack has had technicians working in their employ for as long as 15 years. However, others have moved up to various management positions within the company. It is not uncommon for a representative from LoJack to make a presentation about the company and the employment opportunities that exist to the graduating class at RITOP before the semester is completed.

Dennis Deck is a consumer electronics veteran-turned-educator in the second largest public school system in the U.S.: the Los Angeles unified school district. Covering kindergarten through adult education, the L.A. unified incorporates 960 schools. “I grew up in East L.A., so I have come home to a place where I feel that I can actually make a difference,” Beck explained. Beginning in 1962, Beck dedicated 11 years to CE retail, and spent seven years as a manufacturer’s representative and then 16 years working for such factories as Pioneer and Vehicle Security Electronics (VSE). “VSE was involved in several mobile electronics programs in the Los Angeles area,” added Beck. “I wound up on a trade advisory board, which eventually led me to my career as an educator.”

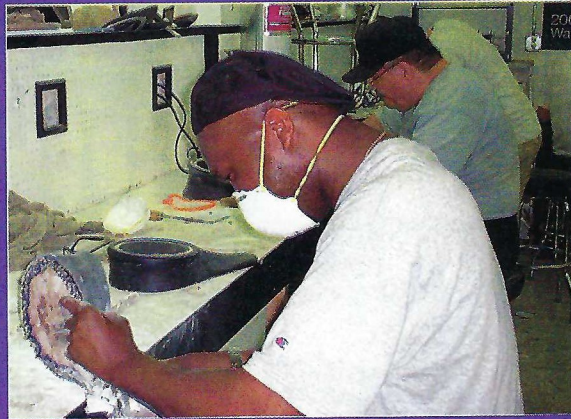
Deck emphasized that the technical programs within the L.A. district are competency-based. “When the students prove that they can

pass the quiz and complete the lab work for the 26 competencies required, they are ready for the mobile electronics work force,” he explained. “We teach six hours per day, five days a week. A two-hour lecture is followed by four hours of lab work. Our objective is to get people trained and get them employed,” Deck added. He is well aware that the big-chain retailers simply cannot afford to gamble on hiring an untrained technician. “We get our students ready for entry-level employment,” Deck said. “We give them what they need to get a job, and keep it. Many learn more as they go. Some work full time as installers; others use the skill to pay their way through college. Those who want to get to the next level as installers often go on to one of the for-profit mobile electronics schools after completing our program.”

### **TRANSCENDING LANGUAGE BARRIERS**

As one can imagine, the L.A. unified school district is stocked with students who speak many different languages and are chasing vastly different dreams. “I try to emphasize to our kids that a technical education can lead to any number of careers,” said Deck. “I got a job, and went on to college. There are numerous paths to take,” he explained. Many of the students lean on each other for support, using a buddy system to assist each other. Technical diagrams are language-neutral, and the learning moves forward with the support of the group. The mobile electronics program in the L.A. schools average 30 to 40 kids per class.

Scottsdale, AZ-based Audio



**A RITOP STUDENT PORES OVER A PROJECT IN A FABRICATION WORKSHOP**

Express has had some experience hiring schooled installers. “I think the schools do some really good things,” reported Ed Santacruz, CEO of the 39-store chain founded in 1974. “The graduates who come looking for work are MECP-certified and have a decent understanding of basic electronics, along with fabrication and box-building skills,” Santacruz said. “The problem is that they do not have enough experience assembling and disassembling actual cars, and they come to us with unrealistic expectations regarding pay,” he added. New hires at Audio Express begin by working under the watchful eye of a senior installer. Understandably, most of the rookies are slower workers as they begin to gain a feel for the different automobiles, and their efficiency cannot compare with that of a seasoned veteran. “On-site training must be done for our new recruits,” Santacruz reported. “It takes a year or more for an installer to become efficient and functionally independent, where they can justify a higher salary for themselves,” he added. “Many of the graduates expect to earn \$15 per hour on their first day, and it is just not realistic.”

David Burnham is the mobile installation technical training manager for Best Buy, and the massive retailer has had success hiring grad-





uates from a school called Mobile Dynamics, an institution with locations in both Arizona and Ontario, Canada. "I feel very comfortable with the curriculum offered by the school," said Burnham. "I have interviewed several graduates of the program, and hired some of them to work at Best Buy. They have a general, basic knowledge of what it takes to be an installer," he added. Burnham acknowledges that there are many career paths that installers can pursue as they learn and develop their skills. "Using myself as an example, I started out as an installer, and moved up to installation supervisor, district installation sales trainer, and finally mobile installation technical training manager. Today, any installer who can grasp the concept of running a business can move up in virtually any company," explained Burnham.

### **'MIT' SOUTH**

Mobile Installation Technologies (MIT) is a company in Marietta, GA serving the fleet vehicle market, installing GPS systems, laptop computers, refrigeration units, and various communications devices. Steve Field, the field operations manager for MIT, has also had success hiring graduates, tapping into those who have completed a semester at the RITOP School, outside of Boston. "I get dependable, mature techs that are not hacks," explained Fields. "We don't have to stand over them and watch what they do every minute," he added. "What we get is a solid, entry-level tech that I can put right to work," said Fields, who noted that the new hires at MIT start under the supervision of a site manager. "We give them a taste of

what road-installation life is like — our technicians do extensive travel. It's a good first job, and an excellent start on their résumé."

### **TAKING PASSION TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

John Bogdan is director of employment at the Tweeter Home Entertainment Group, and has also found success hiring schooled installers. "Many of the students are hobbyists who have taken their passion to the next level by enrolling in school," noted Bogdan. "In addition to the technical training, I find that the graduates do have a realistic idea of what employers may expect of them. They often have the right attitude for work, and show up on time," he added. Bogdan also believes that the graduates he has hired are more easily taught the importance of customer service, a major focus of the internal training at Tweeter. "I want these people to be open to our methods of training, so that they can learn what we expect them to do for our customers," Bogdan concluded.

Bill McDowell is the president of Wild Bill's, a 12-volt retailer located in Boaz, AL. "I'm not knocking the schools at all, but I believe that it is the individual who makes the good installer candidate," stated McDowell. "People with technical skills should be held in high esteem, like they are in many of the European countries. I have heard parents put down the technical education, so I have gotten involved in putting together a two-year degree program with the Arkansas State Technical Institute at the Arkansas State University," said McDowell. The program will include a summer internship, matching up each candidate with a work situation that suits his or her career direction. "We will match them up with a rep firm, a retailer or a manufacturer," he added. McDowell has been work-

■■■ **'ON-SITE TRAINING MUST BE DONE FOR OUR NEW RECRUITS. IT TAKES A YEAR OR MORE FOR AN INSTALLER TO BECOME EFFICIENT & FUNCTIONALLY INDEPENDENT, WHERE THEY CAN JUSTIFY A HIGHER SALARY FOR THEMSELVES.'**

**— ED SANTACRUZ,  
AUDIO EXPRESS,  
SCOTTSDALE, AZ ■■■**

ing on establishing the degree program for over five years now, and he is hoping to find a source for some scholarship money for the kids. "A degree is a degree," said McDowell. "Our goal is to put some qualified people into the marketplace."

### **CREATING GROUNDED, WELL-ROUNDED INSTALLERS**

Most retailers seem to recognize the benefits of hiring an educated installer, citing efficiency, maturity, dedication and experience as the primary gains. Based on the competitive nature of the 12-volt business throughout most of the country, retailers have been creatively seeking ways to entice their installers to remain on board, rather than jumping from shop to shop, disrupting consistency. As the educational programs create a better-rounded installer, demand for such an employee has also increased. Dedicated, versatile and talented installers may have numerous career paths open to them, and find opportunities that will lead them from the pages of their textbooks to the job and security they have always desired.